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SHELTER

DAN LJOKA

THEY LOOKED AT THE DEAD WOMAN

"What will we do with her, Paul?"

"Cut her up and push her down the toilet, that's what we gotta do," said Agnes. "She's dead, ain't she?"

In the bathroom Paul laid the woman on the floor and stripped off her clothing. Then he went in to the storeroom and got a large knife and a hacksaw. A sour taste rose from his stomach. "It has to be done," he whispered to himself. The knife moved back and forth. His hands became sticky with the thick dark blood. The sound of the hacksaw ground against bone.

The inevitable nausea that followed emptied him and left his mouth bitter with bile. A moment later he was leaning outside the door — he could not go on.

Agnes entered and closed the door behind her. Paul cursed himself for his squeamishness. For what seemed like hours he sat there in the dark listening to Agnes' grunts, the slapping of flesh on the concrete floor, the cracking of bones.

But in his mind he also knew that Agnes had moved a step toward leadership of the group, a situation he feared more than anything else. For a new society was being formed within the shelter, and its leader would determine whether it be governed by reason or fear . . . .

SHELTER

DAN LJOKA

MANOR
BOOKS
INC.

TO MY FAMILY

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SHELTER

PROLOGUE

It was the time to die. Not only for man but for all living creatures throughout the world. Across the ocean the white shoreline of Africa sparkled in the bright sun. The vast sea threw itself upon the beach in waves that turned from dark to light blue to white, endlessly rushing back amid the monotonous roar of the next line of assaulting breakers. A warm, gentle ocean wind ruffled the trees and the day seemed like any other day. But this wind was to become the carrier of death, an inescapable deadly dust falling over all the surface of the planet.

A sea bird would take flight from beneath a tree, flap its wings climbing high into the wind and then, as if shot by some unseen hunter, fall into the sea. On the edge of the jungle a large snake would drop from a tree, its white underbelly facing up to the sun, too weak to turn over. A water buffalo would stand motionless by a water hole. Being a beast, he would not understand why he was sick, though sensing the coming of death. His body would shake and his bowels give way, his mighty chest heave, his head drop as he let out a cry muffled by blood until a second spasm brought him to his knees. Slowly his hind quarters would come down and he would lie on his side in his own vomit, quietly waiting.

Farther inland, after hundreds of millions of years, the last crocodile would be dying. He would lift himself and look about for the last time, and then slowly slide into the rapids to be swept away.

Jackals and hyenas would be surrounded by death, yet have no appetite for it, for they too would be dying. And the elephants once again, proving that they had a final resting ground, would gather to move slowly, single file, into the thickness of the jungle, the tremor of their giant steps growing fainter and fainter until they were gone.

The scavengers of the sea, making feast on floating carcasses of whales and porpoises, which like all things that surfaced had died, would devour the flesh and organs of the poisoned dead and become in turn a meal for others.

And the sun would rise and flowers blossom, but there would be no bees. When night set in and grass was green no crickets would sound. And then from somewhere would come the throaty roar of a lion cutting the still night air, a glorious sound, signifying life. And again the following night, even more glorious, the very last animal sound. Then all would be still.

And for the next weeks over all the land would hang a foul smell of death and rot, the only movement and sound that of wind and sea and rivers. Gone would be the birds, the animals. . . .

I

June 4th dawned, a new and memorable day.

In the suburbs of Washington, D. C. the grass, still wet with dew, glittered in the early sun. Except for the chirping of birds all was quiet and still, the air cool and clear. It was a tranquil summer morning.

Shortly after eight o'clock, Paul Root finished his second cup of coffee, kissed his wife and son goodbye. He paused outside his home to watch two squirrels, their movements quick and alive, chase each other around the trunk of a large oak. Then he slid behind the wheel of his Chrysler, waved to Janet and young Paul and backed out of the driveway.

A little before nine he arrived at the Naval Observatory, parked in his allotted space and started toward the Administration building. For some reason he felt unusually engrossed in his natural surroundings—the cloudless sky, the warm morning sun, the shrubs and flowers and trees—perhaps because tomorrow he would start his vacation and for the first time in months, his mind wasn't occupied with his work at the Observatory. He felt happy. Yet there was something, something quiet and unfathomable beyond all that beauty. Slowly searching, his eyes followed the sloping contour of the ground. Then he shook his head and entered the building.

Paul stood a lean six feet and looked taller, and his quiet, polite confidence gave him an air that both men and women liked. He had been at the Observatory for eight years, a short time to be recognized as one of the top men in his astronomical field, celestial mechanics; at thirty-three the youngest man ever appointed Director of the Astronomy

and Astrophysics division. His name appeared often in *Space Science, Science News Letter* and the *Griffith Observer*. Still he was honestly unaffected, almost embarrassed, by his success.

He left the elevator at the third floor and walked down the long hall into his office where his secretary sat sorting the mail.

"Good morning, Doctor," she said, looking up, her eyes stopping at his.

She was an attractive woman, tall, with long black hair, her blue eyes accentuated by a dark complexion. Paul was never quite at ease with her because he knew she found him attractive and that his lack of response was probably taken for shyness rather than absolute fidelity to a beloved and passionate wife.

"Were there any calls?" he asked, taking the mail from her.

"No calls, but. . . ." She walked over to the filing cabinet and bent, her short skirt revealing long, smooth legs right up to the fringe of her panties. "Commander Scott left this report for you," she said, handing him a folder.

Avoiding her eyes, he walked into his office and closed the door. Two hours later she informed him that Captain Spina wanted to see him in his office.

"Christ, I hope it's nothing to interfere with my vacation," Paul mumbled to himself as he started down to the Observatory Superintendent's office on the floor below.

The last year had been hectic, with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration demanding increasingly complex work from the Observatory. This, plus the hundreds of astronomical queries from private organizations connected with the Space Administration, had required his department to work long hours. The strain of too many sixty-hour weeks was starting to show. He had been irritable lately; not so much at the Observatory as at home. Fortunately Janet was understanding, but he realized she also was under a strain. He would make up for it now, though,

and spend every moment of the entire month's holiday with her and his son.

Spina's secretary told him to go right in. His Chief, on the phone, smiled and motioned for him to sit down.

As soon as the call ended Paul asked, "It's nothing to do with my vacation, is it?"

"What?"

"Your wanting to see me?"

"No, not at all." Spina leaned back in the chair and lit a cigarette. "Mary tells me you're leaving for Nova Scotia in the morning. Wish I were going with you."

"Like hell! I've seen enough of you this last year. Now, what did you want, Ed?"

"A favor. A few weeks ago at a weak moment I promised Mary I'd give her club a tour of the Observatory. Then this morning Senator Mann's office called. He's leaving town and had to move up his appointment and. . . ."

Paul started laughing. "And you want me to take your place."

"Well, Mary asked about you and I figured. . . ."

"What time?"

"Noon. Shouldn't take long. They have a luncheon at one-thirty. I was going to show them through the Newcomb Laboratory and the twenty-six-inch telescope dome, then send them on their way." He paused. "I know it's an imposition, Paul."

"No problem. I'm just about cleaned up, anyway." Paul got to his feet. "How many will there be?"

"About twenty."

"Twenty!"

Spina came from behind the desk to put an arm across Paul's shoulder, leading him to the door. "I really appreciate this, buddy," he sighed.

"O. K., but try not to have any more weak moments, buddy."

As Paul stepped into the outer office Spina called to him. "One other thing," he said, taking a slip of paper from his

desk to hand to Paul. "This is a pass for the bomb shelter."

"The shelter?"

Spina shrugged. "I promised Mary."

Back in his own office Paul found the secretary busy typing. "Rita, have you any appointments for lunch?"

"Why, no." A smile crept across her face.

"Well then, since I'm slated to show Mrs. Spina's club the Observatory, I'd like you to accompany me before you go to lunch."

The smile disappeared. "Yes, Doctor," she said curtly.

Half of the clubwomen turned out to be middle-aged; all were freshly coiffured and expensively dressed, some having allowed high fashion to displace common sense. After introductions Paul assumed his role of guide.

"I know you don't have much time before your luncheon so we'll start off by showing you the bomb-and-fallout shelter beneath this building."

In the basement a Marine sentry standing guard in front of a large metal door received the pass, pushed a button and the door slid open. The group started down a long concrete hall with dim red lights spaced every twenty feet along the two hundred feet that gradually sloped downward and then leveled off as it turned a right angle. The dim red glow of the lights and the eerie silence stopped the women's chattering; the clicking of their heels made the only sound in the passageway.

When they reached the turn Paul said, "At this point we're probably about twenty-five feet below the earth's surface. The hall itself could be used as a temporary shelter. Radiation travels in straight lines so the turn provides greater protection to the shelter just beyond it."

They came to a narrow hatch-like entrance of the type found on ships to seal off one compartment from another. It was slightly ajar. As Paul stepped through he was startled to find himself face to face with Agnes Gual, the supervisor of cleaning personnel.

"Oh! It's you," she said, stepping back. "I didn't expect

anyone down here. I was just inspecting. Those sons-of-bitches get lazier every day, goddammit."

He said coldly, "There are ladies present." Then he turned to help them through the narrow hatch, aware of the softness of their hands in his. After everyone was in he closed the hatch and turned the wheel that sealed it.

"I don't know too much about this shelter, but they tell me that when we close the door we're in a hermetically sealed room where nothing can get in or out."

Agnes stood there looking annoyed, saying, "I got other work to do."

Paul, frowning at her, had just placed his hands back on the wheel to let her out when it happened: a muffled prolonged noise combined with jarrings, as though they were on a train just starting up. The lights went out, a woman screamed. Then there were more screams. As the auxiliary lights came on one of the older women fainted, her face striking the cement floor with a sickening thud, her bloodied dentures seeming to ooze out of her twisted mouth. The group moved away from the suddenly grotesque figure as if she were something harmful, their fears swelling to hysteria as they screamed and cried.

Mrs. Spina called, "What's wrong? What's happening? My God, what's happening? Paul, answer me!"

He seemed in a trance. But his logical mind was weighing the possibilities. They were twenty-five feet down beneath tons of earth. An explosion in the building? An earthquake? Or. . . ? He stopped. His mind rejected the obvious, the one thing it could have been: A nuclear explosion. His eyes moved across the wall to the radiation ratemeter hung by the door, then his stomach turned. He felt his body go numb. Sliding down to a crouched position against the wall he buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, God, no," he groaned. "No, no, no!"

II

Paul didn't know how long he crouched there, though it must have been only moments. His mind had fallen into that unmeasuring state of haze between sleep and wakefulness. In it he could see a woman and a boy walking toward him from far away across an endless desolate plain, where waves of heat hovered above a powdered chalk soil. As they got closer it was apparent their clothes were burned away and their flesh, white and bloodless with patches of black, smelled like charred pork. Their faces wore a glare that hurt his eyes; the hair, frizzy and dry, stood out from the woman's head like rolls of barbed wire. The child's whimper was so weak and raspy that it was obvious it hurt to make even that slight cry. The glare disappeared from its face for a moment. That terrifying, hideous child's face was young Paul's, the eyes stark white with pale yellow pupils and no eyelids, the lips colorless scales of peeling skin, cracked and opened, exposing only dry white flesh. His small arm rose slowly as if lifting a heavy weight as he pleadingly reached out for his father.

Paul struggled to move, to wake, though he knew he wasn't truly asleep. He started to choke until finally the bitter juices from his stomach filled his mouth. His eyes opened. He remained in his position against the wall, the smallest movement having become an enormous exertion, but he managed to wipe his mouth.

Becoming aware of a woman attempting to open the hatch he shouted, "Get away from the door!" but she continued as

though she didn't hear him. He tried to stand but his legs were numb, so he dove across the floor, grabbing at her leg.

She kicked at him hysterically, yelling over and over, "I'm getting out of here!"

He felt pain as the blood returned to his legs. Agnes threw the woman away from the door and bent to help Paul stand, saying in a calm, strong voice, "Are you all right?"

For an instant Paul had the urge to plant his head in her bosom, like a frightened child with his mother. "Yes, thank you, Agnes." He turned to the others. "Everyone calm down. Everything is going to be all right; just calm down."

That was all it took, that small reassurance, that one thread of strength to clutch. Two women helped the older one who had fainted. Paul forced his mind to adjust, put things in order. Looking up at the clock, he was surprised. He checked the time against his watch; it was only a few minutes before one. He walked over to the radiation ratemeter to convince himself of what he had seen earlier. The needle was in the red, reading extreme danger.

If I could only know for certain what was happening outside, he thought. *The radio! Why didn't I think of the radio?*

Quickly he went over and turned it on, noting that the dial had been set for conelrad. A broadcaster's voice filled the room.

"This is a national emergency. We are under enemy attack. Please go to the nearest bomb shelter. I repeat, this is a national emergency. . . ."

All hope of having been wrong was instantly erased. He had never thought it could happen; people said it could and you agreed, but you didn't really believe it. He looked at the women. Their hysteria had been replaced by a quiet, dazed shock. *How strange they are*, he thought. The worst possible tragedy is occurring, yet their fear now isn't as great as when they didn't know what was happening. They stood there consoling each other. All but Agnes. She sat alone, surveying the shelter.

Paul began going about taking stock of their situation.

Walking off the room he figured there was about 850 square feet of living space, more than enough by shelter standards. Then it struck him that the shelter had been built for housing important government men, identities kept secret. Why hadn't they come? Why no warning before the attack?

The room grew stuffy. He was perspiring; one of the women nervously puffed on a cigarette, the smoke hanging in the air, and the others fanned themselves. Was something wrong with the ventilation filtering system? Fear seized him.

On the wall at the end of the room he found and opened a switch box which carried the warning: DO NOT TURN SYSTEM ON UNTIL TWO HOURS AFTER NUCLEAR ATTACK. They would have to wait another hour. To preserve the air left in the shelter Paul quieted the women, took off his jacket and sat on the floor. With the stagnant air closing in, his body became beaded with sweat and the cement wall felt cool against his damp back.

Fleeting pictures raced through his mind: Philadelphia; his block; a boy sitting on the warm pavement leaning against the wall; June; school's out—*no more pencils no more books no more teacher's dirty*. . . . The river—dirty, deep, dark—with purple and orange oil slick, human waste and empty brown whiskey bottles and bobbing green wine bottles, all floating on its heavy surface. Grass, green summer grass, cool and deep; the scent of hot dogs, and sitting on the green; Janet and little Paul. . . . *Oh God. I mustn't think of them; not now. Later. Now I must think of now.*

His thick brown hair darkened with perspiration at the hairline and a drop falling into his ear made a crackling sound inside his head. He wiped the sweat from his face.

Think, man, think.

Then, sitting quietly, Paul came to these conclusions: First, there had been no twenty-minute warning as anticipated. So whoever was attacking the country had advanced technical knowledge. Russia, he thought, surprised, since there had seemed to be a slackening of tension. Secondly, the bomb must have struck farther away than

three or four miles, otherwise the shelter would not have withstood the shock. Still, no one had come. The Administration building above could have been destroyed, blocking off the entrance to the shelter, or a fire storm have killed everyone within miles. The jolting of the shelter might have resulted from exploding gas lines. Next, he realized that for an enemy to attack the United States without retaliation meant dropping an enormous number of bombs, simultaneously, over the entire nation and on its bases throughout the world. Impossible, he thought; but then again, so was nuclear attack.

Each assumption led to another, followed by scientific calculations, then questions. What effect would all these bombs have on world atmosphere? What was the type of radiation? Some radiation had a half life of only minutes, some remained deadly for years. He began quite suddenly to think of the possibility of a long confinement within the shelter. Would they have enough food and water? Besides their bodies, what would happen to their minds and personalities during any long period of isolation? Civilization sometimes rubbed off like veneer. He told himself he was being foolishly concerned; a few weeks at most and they would be able to leave. Yet there remained the possibility that it might be a few months.

He studied the women. Most were probably well-educated, reasonably intelligent. An asset. But at the same time, used to easy living, how would they adapt to hardships of confinement? Hadn't Agnes more than anyone else remained calm while the others panicked? He glanced at her. She was a big woman of about thirty-five, with heavy limbs and short dry blond hair brushed straight back and standing out like straw from the back of her large head. Her face was heavy, with high cheekbones that made her small eyes seem like narrow slits above a wide nose and the full lips concealing her large crooked teeth. She got up and walked across the room, her movements graceful but not feminine, more like an athlete's. Not like Janet's, he thought.

Janet and little Paul. He stared without seeing as he allowed his mind to drift back to last night, now so very long ago. He remembered looking proudly down at his sleeping son, whose pillow had a small damp circle of saliva beneath his mouth, which twitched into a grin as he dreamed. He had wanted to kiss him but feared intruding on that happy dream, and instead whispered, "Daddy loves you," and walked softly out of the room. While he undressed he looked at Janet, who slept rolled up in a ball beneath the sheet, her short brown wavy hair curled like delicate flower petals around her face, small and childlike. Yet the mount of her hips showed a full woman.

He remembered sliding into bed beside her, smelling the sweet smell of her lilac bath, laughing softly to himself as he recalled her once running in to pour her scent into his bath water, his cursing while she ran out and both of them laughing hysterically as he stood naked, dripping with crackling bubbles. Last night. . . . He remembered the touch of her against his hand beneath the silk, along her delicate legs, across the mound of her sex, finally cupping her breast, and having her wake knowing and silent. His mouth finding hers. The exchanging of warm breath and taste. Feverish bodies becoming one, hungrily pleasing one another until their needs were mutually satisfied. Beautiful satisfaction, where each owned the other—to him the only way of lovemaking. Tender words and soft throaty laughs. Then the silence of the night as they waited contentedly for sleep, feeling the deep wonder of being alive.

But that was yesterday. Beloved, where are you now? Why, oh why, am I not with you? Are you alive? His body became rigid as he thought of the effects of the explosion. Limbs being ripped from bodies. Empty eye sockets with melted eyes running down blistered faces. The vomiting that signified death. Armies of dead innocents, punished for men's reluctance to try to understand brotherhood.

"It's time to turn the ventilation system on, Mr. Root."

Refusing Agnes' hand he got up, walked over to the box

and turned the switch. They all moved beneath the ventilation duct, dripping with perspiration, waiting for the life-giving air. A minute passed. There was the hum of struggling electric current. Another minute.

A sobbing woman cried, "We're all going to die—I know it! Oh God, help. . .!"

"Shut up," Agnes shouted.

After a few seconds there was the sound of dirt hitting tin, followed by a warm flow of air. They sucked it into their lungs. Sighs. A nervous giggle. A head turned upward with closed eyes, silent voices giving thanks for answered prayers.

They would live.

That evening, the broadcaster, speaking with a slight Southern drawl, instructed everyone in shelters to stay. "There are no total answers, since we have not received any communications from many of our large cities. But, overall, it seems that the entire country has been bombed, killing millions of people, including many high government officials. There is no word on our President, reported to be in Washington at the time of the attack. A group of Midwest scientists is examining the effects on our atmosphere, but it will be some time before they will be able to report their findings. Until then everyone is again instructed to remain inside of some form of shelter." The broadcaster began outlining actions to be taken, such as listing essential supplies and improvising possible last minute measures for survival.

Paul was tired, more tired than he could ever remember, but he looked toward the bunk beds. There were five rows, three high, fifteen in all. He counted the women—eighteen in Mrs. Spina's group; Agnes; Rita, his secretary, and himself: Total, twenty-one. Wearily he got to his feet and examined the shelter more closely.

At one corner was a twelve-by-twelve-foot storeroom packed tightly with canned goods flush to its entrance. The rest of the shelter measured twenty-two by forty feet with an eight-foot ceiling. Except for the steel door, the entire shelter

was built of concrete and painted a light military gray. The bunk beds running lengthwise against the wall took about thirty-five feet of space. Standing against the outside wall of the storeroom were fifteen crated boxes of springs and disassembled beds. Next to the storeroom entrance was a four-thousand-gallon water tank, beside a five-by-seven bathroom. Three-foot cabinets flush to the ceiling, stored with supplies, ran across the entire wall. Beneath the cabinets was a six-burner electric range, and a bookcase containing approximately fifty books. The rest of the wall space was taken by boxes of supplies. The only other furniture was a ten-foot wooden table with two-foot extension leaves, two benches, six canvas folding chairs, a clock and a radio.

With the extra beds and the large amount of water and canned goods, Paul estimated the shelter was supplied to house about thirty people for one year. Again he refused to entertain the thought of being confined for any great length of time.

Later he lay listening to the muffled sobs and moans of frightened women alone in the dark, victims of their own thoughts, without anger, only stabs of grief. Finally Paul's exhausted mind slid into a whirlpool of nightmarish sleep.

When he awoke the shelter was dark. He lit a match and looked at his watch; it said six-thirty. He lay there thinking of yesterday morning. Could only one day have passed? *Where are you, Janet? Paul? Alive?* he whispered and trembled for them. No family, no sunshine, no sweet smell of flowers, only the darkness and the stale smell of people and heavy breathing. To what purpose survival?

The bathroom door opened. In the light he saw Agnes coming out. He got up and went in. It was a small room with a toilet and a sink that had no plumbing but at the bottom a hole with a plug. Fastened to the wall beside the toilet bowl was a tin-plated diagram and explanation of the engineering. The toilet was made up of two parts—a small compartment with an evaporating apparatus that automatically emptied

into a large tank of liquid solvents directly beneath it. There were also instructions on how to hold the top compartment open so that larger objects could be passed directly into the tank of chemicals. It took a minute for Paul to comprehend what was meant by larger objects. They were in a hermetically sealed shelter and if someone should die. . . . He wouldn't think about that; no need to. In a few weeks the radiation would lighten.

When he came out of the bathroom Agnes was brewing coffee. He breathed in its sobering aroma, realizing he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. She looked at him as he approached the table.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"I can use it," he said as he sat down.

"Who do you think did it? The Russians or the Chinks?"

"I don't know, Agnes, but what's the difference? It's done."

He put his head in his hands in momentary anguish, but then looked up sharply as she placed the cup of coffee in front of him.

"We should have bombed all those bastards before they had their nuclear bombs," she said. "This is what we get for being good guys."

The coffee was black and strong and he could feel its warmth reaching his stomach.

"I don't think that would have been the answer, Agnes," he said. "Once the bomb was made this was probably the inevitable outcome. Man fears man and fear turns to hate. The hate that makes us kill each other is really fear. We should have done more to erase that fear."

With only Agnes' eyes giving away her contempt, her thought was, "Bullshit. It's soft jerks like you who are really responsible. You see the world the way you want to, not how it really is. Everybody's only worried about number one, me and mine; fuck everybody else." She started to say something aloud but instead turned and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Paul knew she didn't agree with him but he felt no desire to debate the point. *What's the difference? What's the difference what anyone thinks now*?

By eight o'clock all the women were awake, some just sitting on the sides of their bunks, thinking, not believing, though most were in better spirits than they had been the night before. *Amazing how fast we adapt*, thought Paul. Maybe it was just that involuntary feeling, close to pleasure, that one gets when he survives while all those around him perish.

He sat by the radio while some of the others prepared breakfast, his nostrils widening and the saliva puddling beneath his tongue at the smell of frying bacon. He kept his head down, ashamed of being hungry.

After breakfast Paul went back to the radio. Mrs. Spina came over and sat beside him. For a long time neither spoke. Finally she asked in a trembling voice, "Paul, do you think that my—that our families are alive?"

He looked at her. Her large dark eyes were puffy and wet: a tear quivered on an eyelash. "Try to take it easy, Mary," he said, patting her hand gently. "I can't lie to you. I keep asking myself the same question, but there's nothing to do but wait."

And so they waited. And that day passed without any news. It passed quietly, their only consolation being their own safety.

III

That night Paul's deep sleep was penetrated by mist that was like a white veil floating closer and closer until finally it blocked out the blackness and hung a screen for nightmare. Janet and he were sitting on a dirt floor of a hut. Through its door three Chinese soldiers entered, their boldness signifying absolute authority. Instinctively Paul stepped in front of his wife but was driven back by one of the men holding a gun. Another reached down, pulling on Janet's ankles until she twisted forward, landing on her hands on the floor, while he held her in wheelbarrow fashion. Her full breasts bulged out from beneath her shabby dress and, taking them in those dark hands, he squeezed them until the milky flesh turned bright pink and the nipples bled. She looked toward Paul, pleading but saying nothing, as though she knew some secret truth about him. He screamed, "Listen, be civilized," but they only laughed at him and threw their one gun to the floor, challenging him. Then they all stood motionless, waiting for him to move.

What to do? One must. . . .

"Mr. Root, Mr. Root, wake up!"

He clung to his nightmare, not wanting its torture to fade until he learned that secret. "Not now," he mumbled, turning in bed, his body wet with perspiration, his eyes so heavy that he had to use his mouth to stretch his face and finally pry them open.

Looking up he saw Janet. "Oh, my God, you're safe!" He

reached out and pulled her tightly and unresistingly to him. "It's all been a horrible nightmare."

A voice devoid of any emotion said, "I'm not Janet, Mr. Root. I'm Marian."

He let the words sink in, then was embarrassed. "I'm sorry, so sorry, I was dreaming."

"I know." She got up and straightened her dress, her expression never changing.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, I'm all right. It's time for breakfast."

Through habit he looked at her legs and buttocks as she walked away. He cursed himself for noticing, cursed the women who sat at the table watching his every move, and cursed the men in the world who had brought about the horrible catastrophe. Stupid, stupid unchanging men.

He had slept with his trousers on, and his crotch was wet from perspiration, his genitals hard through need for relief. He knew when he stood up that the women's staring eyes would notice the bulge but, dammit to hell, that's just the way it is, he thought. The bathroom door was open, so he put his shoes on and, without looking at any of them, crossed the shelter to the relative privacy of the five-by-seven room. A minute later he came out to get and carry back a pot of water, the last time he could be so generous with the precious liquid. While standing there naked, washing himself, he was disturbed again by his dream. He knew now how he would have acted, but in the dream he had not been sure when it really counted.

He pulled the plug and let the gray water drain into the bucket beneath the sink, using what remained to rinse himself off. He felt clean until he put on the underclothes, still damp with perspiration. Then looking in the mirror at his unshaven face, he whispered to the image that stared back at him, "I wish I knew for certain what I would have done."

When he came out, breakfast of bacon, hot biscuits, jam and coffee was waiting. A place had been set for him at the head of the table. Agnes sat at the other end.

"You should have eaten without me," he said as he sat down, his eyes meeting Marian's at the middle of the table.

Mrs. Richardson, sitting beside her daughter Mary, said, "Shall we say grace?"

Paul put down the cup of coffee and sat quietly as the women prayed. *How foolish; the country is destroyed and here we thank God for the food we are about to eat.*

During breakfast he became aware for the first time of the women's near worship of him. Agnes seemed to resent this, she herself treating him more as a superior military officer. She showed no friendship for the women, answering their questions with a curt yes or no, her attitude one of anger rather than grief, her muscular figure and sloppy dress setting her apart. Mrs. Boyer sat on her right and if anyone made the difference vivid, it was she.

Mrs. Boyer was forty, slim, wearing her long dark hair in a tight knot, every hair in place, and expensive clothes so conservative as to border on being old-fashioned; but she was quick to smile, even in the present circumstances. The fact that she had been born wealthy separated her from the great majority of people to whom money had vital importance. Her husband had entered politics during the Kennedy administration, and although she loathed the life she adapted philosophically to its social responsibilities.

"Mr. Root," she now asked, "how bad do you think the situation is?"

He said wearily, "You heard the broadcast. Millions were killed."

"Yes, I understand that, but what of the situation here? Shall we have to stay long?"

"I'm sure we'll be informed when it's safe enough to leave."

Agnes interrupted. "Yeah, but where will we go? This place is set up perfect; we'd be fools to leave. We've got everything we need to last. Outside everything must be contaminated, people starving and sick, if they're not dead. If they knew about this shelter they'd be banging down the

goddam door to get in—and end up killing all of us." Agnes seemed to be enjoying the shocked expressions crossing the faces turned to her. "I'm staying here as long as the food and water last," she added.

Mrs. Spina asked contemptuously, "Don't you care about your family?"

"I don't have one. And if I did it wouldn't matter because they'd probably all be dead anyway."

"That's enough, Agnes," snapped Paul. "When it's safe to leave we'll all go out and help whomever we can."

A silence fell while he and Agnes stared at each other. Finally she put her head down to continue eating, whispering under her breath, "You simple bastard."

After breakfast Paul turned the radio on and heard the broadcaster reporting, "At a world meeting in Geneva, the Russians shocked the rest of the world by telling this story. Nothing was withheld because of the grave seriousness of the matter. The Kremlin claimed that the highly respected American senator, Senator Quinn, who is known throughout the world as a man of peace, received information from a reliable source in the Pentagon that the United States was preparing to attack the Soviet Union within a matter of hours. He related this information to his friend and colleague, Senator Ward of Pennsylvania, in hopes that some immediate action could be taken. Senator Ward, it was today revealed, has been a Soviet agent since 1952 when he was released as a Korean war prisoner, though the Kremlin claims that he had really defected to their side and been groomed for two years before being sent back. Within minutes after receiving Ward's information and confirmation from one of their own intelligence agents, there was a meeting of Russian leaders and, believing there wasn't time to investigate further and that nuclear victory would go to whomever struck first, they reacted. Incredibly, over the last five years, the Russians secretly planted nuclear bombs within ten miles of our largest cities and military bases. These were all detonated at the same time. Our military defenses in

Europe, not knowing who was responsible for the attack, wisely restrained from retaliation. When the Kremlin was asked why there was no use of the hot line they simply replied that military strategy required they act immediately.

"Nothing can be proved, since it is assumed that most of our heads of government, including the President, are dead." He paused. "If it is any consolation, Premier Novikov sends the following message: 'The people of the Soviet Union express great regret and sympathy for the nuclear horrors inflicted on the United States and its citizens. We are doing all within our power to help Americans in their hour of need.'

"Most of our largest cities have been destroyed, and countless millions of citizens killed. Yet the winds have been favorable, giving ample time for citizens in other parts of the country to find shelter from fallout. Scientists from the Midwest report that the most dangerous radiation will pass within a few days, although anyone in shelter within ten miles of a large city should stay inside for another week, since the radiation is heavier and will linger longer in these areas. Thousands of planes with food, medical supplies, and doctors are being flown in from countries throughout the world. In a few days I will pass on to you the locations of aid stations that will be set up when the radiation level becomes safe. The Red Cross will have transportation to evacuate people to safer parts of the country, outside the immediate range of the explosions. In spite of the incoming aid, it will be a time of extreme hardship for everyone, so bring with you all food and clothing not contaminated." Then he paused for a moment, and when he spoke again his voice was soft, reflecting the bond that holds together people facing the same tragedy. "My fellow citizens, it is now that we must all draw on our reserves of courage and faith to see us through this crisis, and with God's help, we'll make it."

Paul sat expressionless by the radio, as if he were listening to everyday news. But he was thinking of the tens of billions of dollars wasted on defense—money that could have been

used to feed millions of starving children throughout the world, to build international universities where men might have learned to understand each other better, to direct scientists and engineers toward man's salvation rather than his annihilation. But no, it was the choice of man to build nuclear bombs and missiles and antimissiles and retardation missiles and a shield of thousands of missiles that nothing could penetrate. And now, how ironic that it should have come from within. How simple a plan.

These things passed through his mind in a fraction of a moment before he began thinking of his family, the probable distance between the explosion and his home. Logically, three five-megaton nuclear bombs placed properly would destroy all of Washington, Quantico, the Marine base that lay to the south, and Andrews Air Force Base, located to the southeast. If this were the case then his family had a chance, because his home northeast of Washington would lie nearly twenty miles from the explosions. Next, assuming the bombs were buried, there would be a limited number of fires, since a nuclear weapon must be detonated high in the air for maximum fire damage. This tied in with the radiation ratemeter remaining at the extreme danger level, for the fallout from detonation at ground zero would be much greater, lifting tons of vaporized contaminated earth. So distance would give his family about an hour to find shelter before the fallout came. These were only assumptions, but intelligent assumptions, and they restored hope that Janet and the boy were still alive. He hoped with all his heart that the Russians were for once telling the truth. Because if they were lying, if this were all part of a master plan for conquest, then there would be other phases of it to come.

For a long moment Paul sat quietly, then decided that nothing was to be gained by contemplating further horrors.

He turned to the women. "Assuming that the Russians are telling the truth, there's a good chance many of the families in the suburbs survived. We should start preparing to carry

out as much food as we can, and when the time comes be ready to do our part."

That afternoon Paul kept busy taking boxes out of the storeroom and examining their contents. Some of the women helped but most sat at the table lingering over lunch, almost cheerful as they chatted among themselves. Maybe it was knowing the why and how it happened, and that man had not completely lost reason. The worst of the catastrophe was over.

Agnes sat apart, seemingly amused at their high spirits, and when Paul was out of earshot she said, "What dumb-ass fools the Russians must take us for. They've lied to us for years—it's part of their plan—and yet you still believe their lies." She started to laugh. "You poor stupid fools."

"Oh, shut up!" yelled Rita.

Instantly the grin disappeared from Agnes' face. "Watch it, Miss Bitch," she hissed, standing up and leaning over the table toward Rita. "You're not talking to one of these other women. Talk like that to me again and I'll knock your face in."

Rita was visibly shaken. Looking at that menacing face she knew the threat was not idle. She felt herself tremble as she shrank back. Seeing Rita's fear, Agnes resumed her seat, her full lips curling slowly into a grin as she sat enjoying the discomfort and shock of the now silent women.

"Hey, everybody, look what we found," called the two women who had been working with Paul as they came out of the storeroom carrying a box of large-size men's pajamas.

That evening, for the first time in the shelter, the women laughed together, all in the same comically striped baggy pajamas.

Late into the night Paul lay awake, not with that weary restlessness of mind and body when sleep is difficult but rather with a feeling of optimism, mingled with anxiety to find his family. He hadn't been so concerned about his own survival when Janet and his son seemed lost but now—now he would be needed terribly, more than ever before. That

instinctive drive to protect, to surmount all obstacles for the sake of his family, hinged on life; only his being alive could help them survive in a harsh new world.

Drowsiness finally closed in on him. . . .

They're dead.

No, they're alive.

Alive?

Yes, yes—alive and waiting for me.

They . . . are . . . alive.

He drifted deeper, a warm smile crossing his face as he visualized reunion with his family, imagining what she would say and what he would answer. They were laughing and their son was laughing. And then they were naked and holding hands and running across a field of wild grass and flowers; everything so clear, so in place. One needed very little to be happy. Why hadn't he seen? Why, instead of spending so much time on mathematics and celestial searchings, hadn't he enjoyed the many little things more? Happiness was those intimate moments that one grabs and holds onto.

Janet stopped running to lie down on a bed of soft flowers, while the boy danced on out of sight. She lay with limbs spread, motioning Paul down to her. . . .

His body jerked involuntarily and he came fully awake, sitting up, straining all his senses. The shelter was dark except for the ray of light from the bathroom. He could hear only the rhythmic breathing of the women, nothing more. Then, bare feet on the floor, he felt a tremor ever so slight. Instantly he sprang to turn the ventilation system off.

One of the women awoke. "What's that? What's the matter?"

"Quiet. Be quiet," he demanded.

No sooner had he spoken than the shelter was jarred so hard that the clock and radiation ratemeter fell from the wall. He switched on the lights amid frightened cries from the bunks. Then he turned on the radio, while the jarring came again, worse than before. First there was only static, then the broadcaster's voice, faintly:

"We . . . enemy attack . . . go . . . nearest. . . ."

Paul stared at the radio, a hoarse cry rising within him. "No, no! Not again! Wasn't it enough?" Then, as never before, he was seized by a fit of anger. "You bastards! You crazy nogood bastards!" he screamed.

Someone pulled at his arm. He spun around, his face twisted in rage. "What?" he yelled at Mrs. Boyer, so violently that she stepped back, taking a moment before she could speak again.

"Why?" he shouted. "How do I know why? How does anyone know why? Ask your God why."

He moved toward her and she, now thinking Paul mad, shrank away. A muffled noise passed through the shelter.

"Listen—you hear that? It's men killing each other as they did thousands of years ago, even beyond that, from the beginning of man, only now we've become more proficient at it." With his bare foot he angrily kicked a chair across the room. "They say man is subject to change—when?"

A near hit shook the shelter violently, knocking the canned goods from the cabinets along the wall. Some of the women crawled under beds while others clung to each other in panic.

Paul continued, as if now indifferent to everything going on around him, "We try to disassociate ourselves from the animals because we feel we're above them—but we're the worst. Other animals only kill for food. We're the real killers."

His distorted face was very close to Mrs. Boyer, who was backed up against the wall. She burst into tears. "Oh, please, Mr. Root," she pleaded.

As suddenly as his anger came it passed. He stepped back, exhausted, calm, looking at the bedlam around him. Then he deliberately walked over to his bed and sat down, his head sagging on his chest.

"How do I know why?" he mumbled to himself. "Maybe it's just part of the scheme of things."

Then he was silent. Sounds became more muffled, the

women's screams turned to sobs, and by degrees everyone became lost in the hell of their own thoughts.

Three hours later Agnes turned the ventilation system back on. She stood there for a moment, her eyes moving from bed to bed. No one stirred and so no one saw the grin that came across her face.

Marian opened her eyes and looked at her watch. Ten o'clock. A. M. or P. M.?

"What's it matter?" she mumbled to herself as she stretched, then rolled the long pajama pants up above her ankles. Static was coming from the radio; she turned it off. Then she filled the coffee pot with water and disappeared into the bathroom. When she came out her short hair was brushed straight back off her face and she was wearing the wrinkled but clean white linen dress that she had washed the night before. The coffee started boiling over. She turned it to perk and then went about picking up the fallen cans of food. Finally the aroma of the coffee became too appetizing. She poured herself a cup, sat down at the table and looked at the women who lay still in their beds, some awake and staring back at her with empty eyes. No one spoke.

"Good morning," said Agnes as she came up and sat beside Marian. "They must have done a good job of bombing; the air's still warm in here." She half smiled, looking up at the ceiling as if visualizing the outside. "Everything must be burning out there," she exclaimed almost joyously. Then, sensing Marian's shock, she added, "I mean we're lucky to be safe in here, right?"

But Marian, giving no sign of having heard her, poured a cup of coffee and carried it over to Paul who sat with legs hanging over the side of the bed. "You like it black, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you," he answered in a hoarse voice, taking the cup from her. His eyes were puffy, and she wondered if

he had been crying during the night or if it were just from sleep.

"Who turned the radio off?"

"I did. There was only static."

He nodded and then his dark eyes gazed down at his feet.

Marian sat down beside him on the bed. "It all seems hopeless, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Do you think maybe there's a chance that some people. . . ."

"Survived?" He looked at her. "No, not unless they were in this type of shelter. There were at least a dozen explosions. I don't understand how even we managed to survive. It would be hard to imagine how horrible it was." His voice softened. "Do you have any children?"

"A baby girl."

"I have a five-year-old. . . ." His voice cracked with emotion, and he paused for a full minute. "I'd give anything to change places with them." When he turned to look at her glistening tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

They sat quietly for a long time. Both alone, quite alone.

IV

For more than an hour Prime Minister Parker stood silently looking out at the sea from high on Mt. Roos in New Zealand. The cold June air numbed his face, and his eyes watered in the whistling wind. Thirty yards back, from a black Bentley sedan parked on the side of the narrow road, a large man stepped out and slowly walked forward. Reluctantly he said, "Mr. Prime Minister, it's almost three o'clock."

"What?"

"Three o'clock, sir."

"Oh yes; yes. Thank you, Paddy."

He turned back once more to the sea, shining through the mist. "It's beautiful, isn't it, Paddy?" he said in a tranquil voice.

"It is indeed," came the answer.

The Prime Minister took Paddy's arm as they walked toward the car. "Does a man good to stand on a mountain top, Paddy. Clears his head."

"That it does, sir. Yes indeed."

The car rolled steadily down the winding mountain road. At the bottom Paddy accelerated and headed toward Wellington. After a few miles it started to drizzle. The Prime Minister looked out the window at the herds of sheep on the fertile plains and valleys. Wasted; they would all be wasted, he thought. And the people who had invested so much of themselves in the land and livestock—wasted, too. A sick

sensation. . . . in the pit of his stomach as he thought of the millions who would die. It was hard for him to concede that this magnificent land would be destroyed by the deadly radiation soon coming.

The purr of the engine changed as the car took an upgrade. He sat back and took a cigarette from the silver case that lay on the seat beside him. "I guess the cabinet is wondering where we went, Paddy."

Paddy looked in the rear view mirror. "Yes, sir."

"Can't blame them, though." The Prime Minister gazed out the window at the rain now falling harder. "There's so much to do and so little time to do it in."

"Well, you have to get away for a little bit, sir. You've been at it night and day and, if I may say so, you're looking a bit tired from it all." Paddy paused. "I'm sure the Deputy Prime Minister can handle things for awhile."

The Prime Minister laid his head back on the cold plush leather seat and laughed to himself as he recalled the expression on McBride's face when he had left his office.

"Where are you going, Mr. Prime Minister?" McBride had asked.

"Out," he had replied sharply as he put on his coat and hurried down the hall with a nervous McBride hot on his heels.

"But where, sir?"

"Just out, and don't call me on the car phone. I'll be back by four o'clock."

"But—but, sir, what if some emergency arises?"

The Prime Minister had stopped and placed his hands on the shoulders of the small fat man fifteen years his senior. "Listen, old chap," he said in a very serious and personal tone, while looking straight in his eyes, "if anything comes up. . . ." he paused and waited.

"Yes, yes. . . ."

"Take care of it." He had turned so as not to show the smile on his face and hurried into the waiting car, leaving McBride sputtering on the sidewalk.

"But sir. . . ."

"That's an order," the Prime Minister had shouted as the Bentley pulled away. And then he had laughed the first laugh since the whole bloody mess began.

He put the cigarette out and closed his eyes. Paddy turned the heater on and the warm air added to the Prime Minister's drowsiness. He had slept little in the five days since the world had gone mad. Could it have been only five days ago? And yet, when he thought of it, everything had happened so fast—as in a bad dream. At first he had asked himself if it were really happening, but seeing the terrified faces around him he knew he wasn't dreaming and the hair on the back of his neck stood up in the realization that he was part of the greatest human catastrophe of all time. All the dead from all the combined wars of the past would be nothing in comparison to those who had died and were yet to die in this war lasting only hours. He shuddered at the enormity of it and at the decisions he would have to make in the days ahead.

"Rise up to it, Prime Minister, rise up to it," he now demanded of himself. Then the muffled sound of the rain joined in rhythm with the windshield wipers and his mind took flight in sleep.

Paddy glanced in the mirror just as the Prime Minister's head fell sideways, limp like a rag doll, a lock of hair over his forehead and his lower jaw slightly open, making him look younger than his forty-two years, almost boyish. Paddy slowed down. He would stretch to thirty the fifteen minutes to Wellington. His expression never changed but his eyes showed the quiet affection he felt for the Prime Minister. He remembered the first time he had met him, a little over two years ago, right after Parker had taken office, and how shocked he was at the youth of the new head of government. The Prime Minister had only glanced his way but had caught his expression, and a few days later when they were alone in the car, he had leaned forward.

"You looked a little surprised when you first saw me. Why?"

"Er . . . surprised, sir?"

"Yes, surprised."

"Well, sir," after a pause, "I must say you look a bit young."

The Prime Minister had roared and fallen back on the seat laughing. "I am, man; I am." Then the Prime Minister had leaned forward again and said, "I'd bet five pounds you didn't vote for me."

Paddy had been quiet.

"Well?"

"Well, I, er. . . ."

The Prime Minister had laughed harder than before. "We're going to get along fine, Paddy. You wait and see."

And with each month Paddy had grown more ashamed for not having voted for him. Parker brought youth, vitality and confidence to the government. He struck out at social injustices and united the country as never before. Early cries of anguish were drowned out by his brilliant speeches of logic and understanding. People sensed in him a great leader, a man for the time. His leadership was not confined to his own country; in two short years as Prime Minister he became a world figure, relentless in his pursuit of world peace, crossing the sea and speaking at the United Nations, calling not only for the outlawing of nuclear weapons but the eventual disbanding of national armies.

"But who will protect our shores?" they shouted.

"From whom, if there be no armies?" he replied.

"But in emergencies, who will back our laws and guarantee the disbanding?"

"A world army comprised of all nations. It is the only way to stop all wars."

But his logic fell on the deaf ears of men too set in their ways. When he came back to his own country he was dejected but not beaten. He would never give up. His opposition, though secretly admiring, made a point of avoiding him; for to admit he was right would be to admit themselves wrong, and pride is as strong as it is irrational.

The car phone rang just as they reached the outskirts of Wellington. Paddy reached back for it.

"I have it, Paddy."

"Mr. Prime Minister, it's four o'clock," said McBride's almost childlike voice.

The Prime Minister rubbed his hand across bloodshot eyes. "Thank you, Mac. Anything new happen?"

"Yes, sir. One of our destroyers intercepted a Russian nuclear submarine limping toward our shore. Couldn't submerge because of damage, so the captain is coming here to surrender."

"Surrender?" exclaimed the Prime Minister, now fully awake.

"Yes, that's what he told our destroyer commander. Kind of silly though, isn't it?"

"Where's the sub now?"

"Off Cloudy Bay."

"All right; connect me with Admiral Cox."

"He's not here. He went out to meet the sub."

"Damn it, I should have been there," mumbled the Prime Minister to himself.

"What's that?" asked McBride.

"Just thinking out loud. Did you find out if there are any missiles aboard the sub?"

"Don't know for sure, but Admiral Cox said it's an attack submarine, the type used to defend their missile-carrying subs. Why? You don't think they would be foolish enough to. . . ."

"No, they wouldn't have to come this close if they wanted to fire them. All the same, I'd feel better if I knew for sure. Anything else happen?

"Nothing important."

"All right, Mac, I'll be there in a few minutes." He slammed the phone down and leaned forward. "Step on it, Paddy."

New Zealand is a country consisting of several islands. The two main ones, where most of the more than two and a half million people live, are the North and South Islands, separated by Cook Strait. Wellington, the capital, lies on the south end of North Island. It is here that the Parliament buildings stand on rolling green acreage surrounded by trees and a background of green-covered mountains. The main building is supported by columns of large pillars, with high white marble steps leading to its entrance. On the flat roof is a newly-built flight deck with the Prime Minister's six-passenger helicopter standing ready. Inside, on the main floor, is the Prime Minister's private office—a large, simply furnished room, containing a desk, four chairs, a large leather couch, two end tables and lamps, and a deep burgundy wall-to-wall carpet. The white walls are barren except for a picture of Winston Churchill, whom Parker greatly admired but never had the good fortune to meet personally.

The Russian naval officer stood at attention in front of the desk. "I am Captain Kofkofsky of the Soviet Navy, in command of the nuclear submarine Sorokin," he said in a very militant manner and without the slightest accent.

The Prime Minister was surprised at the Captain's perfect English but more surprised at his frail appearance. He must have been about fifty, no more than five foot four or five, with bulging dark eyes set in the hollows of a bony face. He was so thin, his complexion so pallid, that Parker was almost tempted to ask about his health. Instead he pointed to the chair beside his desk. "Please sit down, Captain."

Mac and Admiral Cox sat on the leather couch.

"Well, Captain," said the Prime Minister, "could you tell us why you chose to come to New Zealand? You must have realized we were an ally of the United States."

"Yes, sir, but I had no choice. My submarine was severely damaged and I lost all radio contact. New Zealand was the closest port."

"What were you doing so far south and how did your ship get damaged?"

The habit of maintaining military secrecy made the Captain pause for a moment; then, "We were on an experimental cruise off Antarctica when on June fourth we received a message to rendezvous at a predesignated spot. You realize I cannot reveal that location."

A puzzled expression came across the Prime Minister's face and he looked questioningly toward Mac and Admiral Cox.

"Is something wrong?" asked the Russian.

"No, no. Continue, Captain."

"Four days later, about five hundred miles north of here, we came in contact with a. . . ." he paused and nervously ran his fingers through his hair, "I believe it was an American or British submarine. We tried to avoid it since our main objective was to reach our rendezvous, but it tracked us and showed every intention of being hostile." The Captain took out a handkerchief and wiped the small beads of sweat from his forehead. "There was combat. Our ship was damaged but we managed to surface. I lost nine men. There were no survivors from the other submarine."

Admiral Cox interrupted. "Still, with what you say, what warranted your attack? It's been common for submarines to track one another."

"Yes, but as you know, Admiral, our ships have computers that analyze these movements and in this case they indicated an attack. Also, the earlier signal of rendezvous meant for us to proceed under war conditions."

The Admiral nodded and sat back as if satisfied with the Russian's reasoning. For, in fact, if the Captain had his dates right the United States and its allies were at war with Russia at the time, and in all probability their intention was to destroy the Soviet submarine.

The Captain continued. "After surfacing, it was impossible to submerge again. The damage was too severe to be repaired at sea. Most of the crew wanted to go on, but considering the ship's condition I felt it pointless to try for our country. And so, for the safety of my crew, I headed to New

Zealand." The Captain reached inside his pocket for a cigarette. "Please, do you mind if I smoke?"

The Prime Minister nodded approval. "You say your radio's been out since June eighth?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes, sir, that is correct." He deeply inhaled the cigarette smoke, his cheeks becoming hollows in his skeleton-like face.

"Then you're unaware of what's happened since then?"

"Yes, but if my English is correct you used past tense when you spoke of your alliance with America."

"I would also use the past tense in referring to Russia."

The Captain said nothing but waited for the Prime Minister to continue.

"You don't seem surprised," said Parker.

"I am shocked—the type of shock one feels when informed that a very ill person has died. As a military man I thought the outcome inevitable once it started."

"And did you feel it inevitable that your country would use cobalt radiation?" Mac said in an angry voice.

The Captain looked surprised. "Cobalt? I don't see any purpose in that; it's almost suicidal."

Parker raised his hand. "Take it easy, Mac, the Captain's not to blame. It's believed that China used cobalt bombs first. At the end even the United States and France were using them." The Captain's body was breaking out in a clammy sweat. Even considering an atomic war, he had always thought his family would be fairly safe, since his home was located in a small town along the northeastern coast of Russia, far from any strategic point. But now, with cobalt radiation. . . .

"How extensive was the war?" he asked.

Parker shook his head in silence.

"Total destruction?" asked the Russian after a brief pause.

"Captain, I can only tell you what has been reported to us. We know for certain that Moscow, Washington, Peking, Paris and London are completely destroyed, along with

many other capitals. We know the war lasted for three days and that they dropped nuclear bombs as far south as Indonesia. Our scientists estimate that more than 300,000 megatons have been exploded in the northern hemisphere. This probably accounts for the loss of radio contact with most of the countries in that hemisphere."

An astonished look crossed the Captain's face. "I didn't think the world had so large a nuclear stockpile. I wouldn't think it necessary."

"It wasn't," said the Prime Minister. "We know that in 1968 the United States nuclear stockpile contained over seventy thousand megatons, half of which—if dropped on Russia—would kill ninety-five per cent of the population by fallout alone. It's estimated that your country had a similar capacity, with China running a close third. Each country, fearing the others would pass it, felt obliged to keep adding to its stockpile."

The Captain leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Are you all right, Captain?" asked the Prime Minister.

He sat up. "Yes, sir, I . . . I was just thinking of my family. Forgive me."

"I'm sorry for telling you right out like that. I know it must be a shock, but you see with all that's happened in the last few days we've become somewhat immune to shock."

The Captain recovered his composure. "Your country is very fortunate to be so far from it all."

"Oh, we're not so fortunate," declared Mac. "We expect to receive the fallout in six to eight weeks."

"But you are in the southern hemisphere," exclaimed the Captain. "I always thought it would take several months before an exchange of air took place between the hemispheres, and by that time most of the radiation would be gone."

"Our hemisphere's already received a light dose by diffusion," said Mac. "Not enough to be fatal, but farther north its effects are making those people with a low tolerance quite sick."

The Admiral interrupted. "Captain, let me say that, even before the war, atmospheric circulation was quite complex and not perfectly understood. So many nuclear bombs, releasing unmeasurable amounts of heat and blast, most certainly will affect the major wind belts. With smaller bombs, the radioactive particles and dust carry into the troposphere, where most of them come down within a short period of time. But these larger bombs have carried the radioactivity above the troposphere into the stratosphere. That's the area above the clouds."

"But don't stratospheric winds travel to east and west around the world?" interrupted the Captain.

"Yes, but from the equator there's a general drift toward the poles, and that's where the scientists say some of the radiation is entering our hemisphere. It will stay up there until it reaches the polar region, then some of it will drop into the troposphere and move back toward the equator. Also, the equatorial region has been affected. Normally the southeasterly trade winds of our hemisphere and the northeasterly trade winds of the northern hemisphere calmly flow together at the doldrums belt and there's only a slight exchange of air. But now these circulation patterns have been disturbed, causing the winds to flow in various directions and with greater force." He paused. "Of course, this is only a theory of our scientists and there's no time to really check it out, but it seems reasonably true since we're receiving the radiation from the north."

The phone on the Prime Minister's desk buzzed. His secretary announced the arrival of George Pritchett and some others. George Pritchett was the head of the largest contracting company in New Zealand and considered by many to be the finest engineer in the country. After the first attack on the United States the Prime Minister had summoned Pritchett to Parliament House to discuss with him his plan of converting the tunnels to shelters. Pritchett had agreed to investigate the possibility and report on his findings by this date.

"Have Mr. Pritchett and the other gentlemen wait in the board room," said the Prime Minister. "I'll only be a few minutes."

"Yes, sir. Oh," she quickly added, "Mrs. Parker called. She wanted to know if you would be coming home for dinner."

He hadn't allowed himself to think of Cynthia and the children; it was too hard and there was so much to do. But now just the mention of her sounded wonderful and comforting. "Tell her I'll probably be home by seven, and tell her I've asked the Douglases to have dinner with us."

He put the phone down and stood up. "Well, Captain, I know you must be tired and anxious to get back to your ship. Admiral Cox will have someone look after you and your crew. You may feel at liberty to go wherever you choose while you're here in New Zealand, although I suggest you get out of those uniforms." He paused, "After all, there's no use for them any longer, is there?" The Captain started to say something but Parker interrupted. "Tomorrow when you're rested, Admiral Cox will try and answer all your questions."

The Captain stood at attention. "Thank you very much, sir. It was very kind of you to be so hospitable to me."

The Prime Minister smiled at the Captain, then walked toward the door signaling Mac to join him. Outside in the hall he turned to say, "Have some men keep an eye on the Captain and his crew."

"Why? Do you think they may try something?"

"No, Mac. I'm afraid our citizens may try something."

The Prime Minister turned and entered the board room where Pritchett and the other man sat waiting.

At dinner Bill Douglas was his usual humorous self. He was big, robust, redheaded Scotsman, with a hearty laugh that could shake the chandeliers. He had come to New Zealand as a student in 1950, when he met his Elizabeth,

and Parker. After graduation he returned to Scotland, but a few months later he was back to marry Elizabeth and become a citizen. Both were devoted Catholics, which accounted for their nine children, two of whom were godchildren of Parker and his wife. Douglas was an electrical engineer and general supervisor of the many generating power stations on North Island.

Although very fond of the Douglases, Cynthia had been disappointed that her husband had invited them to dinner because she knew he was exhausted and in need of sleep; also she hadn't had a chance really to be alone with him in days, and there were so many things to ask him. But now she was pleased. The dinner was cheerful and her husband laughing, apparently enjoying himself, and everything seemed normal. Maybe, just maybe, might the scientists be wrong and the radiation not come? "Oh, please, God," she whispered to herself, "don't let it come, please don't let it come."

After dinner the two men went into the study and closed the door. Douglas fell into a soft armchair. "I don't know how you stay so trim, Richard," he said as he patted his own protruding stomach. "One of the pleasures of life is eating good food."

From the other room they could hear the children making a racket. The Prime Minister smiled. "It seems your appetite isn't limited to food alone, old man."

Douglas laughed. "Aye, and we think there may be another on the way."

There was a quiet pause as both men realized the impossibility of a fruitful pregnancy. The Prime Minister cleared his throat.

"How about a drink?"

"Make it a large one," said Douglas in a flat voice.

"Would you like it on the rocks?"

Douglas didn't answer. He sat back in the chair, lost in thought.

"Bill, would you like ice with your drink?"

"Oh. Sorry, Richard, Yes, ice, a little ice will be fine."

The Prime Minister poured two large scotches, handed one to Douglas and sat down.

Douglas took a large gulp. "I'd say I was a bit surprised that you invited me over, Richard—you know, with you being so busy and all. Has it anything to do with the generating station?"

"Why, yes. But what made you ask?"

"Oh, I've heard that there were government men checking our generators at the Karapiro and Arapuni stations. I also read in the newspaper that the government is suspected of planning to build shelters. Don't know how you would be able to do that in two months, but if you do you'll need electricity."

"Well, it will be in the newspaper tomorrow," said the Prime Minister. "We're not exactly going to build shelters. We're going to convert our tunnels to shelters."

Douglas let out a low whistle. "I say, that's a great idea if you can do it in time. How many tunnels will you be able to convert?"

"Six, according to George Pritchett. They'll have to work around the clock to finish in eight weeks—a job that under normal conditions would take six months or more. I just received his report today. Certainly a brilliant engineer—didn't seem to overlook anything. Remarkable when you consider he did it on such short notice."

Douglas nodded and sat up attentively.

The Prime Minister continued. "Combined, the tunnels total a distance of over sixteen miles in length, the longest single one being the Kaimai tunnel that links Warkito with Bay of Plenty. It's over five miles long, with a good ventilation system. In fact, according to Pritchett, all the tunnels selected have ventilating systems capable of being altered with filters that would meet the requirements." He began to pace the room. "If only we had more time we could convert

the Otera tunnel through the southern Alps. It's also over five miles long but it's old, with no lights and only a natural cross ventilation system." He looked at Douglas as if apologizing. "There's just not enough time." Parker lifted his glass and emptied it.

Douglas got up and took the Prime Minister's glass. "Why are you so hard on yourself, Richard? You're not to blame. There's only so much anyone can do, old man." He walked across the room and poured two more drinks.

"But do you realize how many lives we could save if we had time to convert that tunnel?" said the Prime Minister.

Douglas came back and handed him his drink, saying, "Why don't I finish this glass and let you get some sleep."

"No, there's more I have to tell you. Sit down."

After Douglas was seated the Prime Minister went on. "They intend to tap three or four deep water wells for each shelter. To save space, the wells will be tapped outside and the water pumped through pipe lines into the shelter. They plan an entire plumbing system within the place. Electrical power will be supplied for each shelter from two separate generating plants." He paused. "That's where you come in. The generators will have to run for two years without maintenance."

"That should be no problem," said Douglas confidently. "You could set it up so if one generator goes out, the power automatically shifts over to the other. No, I'd say that shouldn't be much of a problem at all."

"In the morning I'd like you to meet with Pritchett. I suggested that you be in charge of the electrical operation. You'll have capable men working with you."

Douglas nodded. "I'll be glad to help however I can." He smiled. "Thank you for having so much confidence in me, Richard." He paused for a moment then asked, "How many people do they estimate the tunnels will hold?"

"A lot depends on how long the radiation lasts. A tremendous amount of supplies will have to be stored with the oc-

cupants. As you probably read, some of our scientists believe it will be two years before our atmosphere will be livable again, although others say it will be much longer." The Prime Minister took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled it. "There's no way of knowing for sure. With Hiroshima and Nagasaki the people were able to move back into the areas within a relatively short period of time. In 1954 when the United States dropped a hydrogen test bomb on the island of Bikini, the scientists said the island would be contaminated for many years to come, yet within two years some of the Bikinians returned. There's no guarantee that the radiation will weaken in two years, but it seems we have no other measure. To house less people would be impractical, since it very well may last longer than anyone could survive. Figuring on two years, we should be able to save ninety thousand citizens, of which four-fifths would be children between the ages of eight and ten."

Douglas' face twitched involuntarily. Of his nine children, only one was within the age bracket.

"They chose that age because they require less attention and food," explained Parker.

"Who will select. . . ?" Douglas stopped, his eyes fixed on the Prime Minister.

"There will be two lotteries set up," Parker said slowly, "one for male children and one for female. A slightly larger percentage of females will be selected for obvious reasons of reproduction when they reach maturity. As far as the adults, they'll be doctors, teachers and engineers, all selected after tests as to their physical and psychological condition."

There was a pause, then Douglas said angrily, "It's all so damn technical, as if we're dealing with figures and not human lives. Those bloody fools on the other side of the world—it's not bad enough that they killed each other, but why the hell do they have to take us with them?"

Said Parker, "But that's the way it is and there's nothing we can do about it. A nuclear war is everyone's war. Man

was given responsibility for the earth and he made a bloody mess of it. With the help of God, those in the shelters will have a second chance."

Douglas stood up. "I need another drink. How about you, Richard?"

"No; I'm fine, thank you."

This time Douglas half filled his glass with scotch.

"Look here, Bill," said Richard, "I don't relish telling you this, but I think there's a strong possibility you may be selected for a shelter."

"What?" gasped Douglas. "I could never leave Elizabeth and the children. No, I shan't go . . . I would refuse. How could any decent man leave his family at a time like that? No! Absolutely not."

"I'm sorry you feel like that," said Parker, his voice betraying his disappointment, "but no one could blame you. Unfortunately, some of us have responsibilities beyond our personal lives."

Instantly Douglas realized that the Prime Minister would probably be selected and be as reluctant. "I'm sorry, Richard; I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

Just then Cynthia knocked and stuck her head in the door. "Sorry to disturb you, but Elizabeth wanted to know if she should leave without you. It's close to the children's bedtime."

Douglas turned to the Prime Minister, who pushed himself out of the chair. "Oh, we're finished. Besides, I don't think her husband is in any condition to drive himself home. These Scotsmen will never learn how to drink."

"Why, you never saw the day. . . ."

"Oh, come on," chuckled Parker.

As they stepped into the other room Douglas took hold of his host's arm. "I shouldn't think I'll change my mind, Richard, but I'll think about what you said. I really will."

The Prime Minister nodded.

In the hall Cynthia was helping with the children's coats,

young Richard standing on the staircase watching.

Mrs. Douglas said, "My, Richard, you're becoming quite a big boy. How old are you now?"

"I'll be twelve in August," said the boy.

"I'll be five!" shouted his sister.

Then all the children started shouting their ages. Both mothers laughed. The two men stood silent.

V

Paul Root came out of the storeroom, walked across to the table, and said in a loud voice, "Everyone please gather around." When all the women were seated at the long table he said, "I think it's time for us to pull ourselves together and face facts. Judging from my inventory, we can assume the shelter was planned to house thirty people for one year, and that with careful rationing the food will be quite adequate to sustain us for the two years we'll have to stay here. The water supply, unfortunately, presents a problem. We have approximately four thousand gallons in the tank. The minimum requirement for a human is one quart of liquid per day, which means water will have to be rationed very, very carefully. I suggest we wear as little clothing as necessary. From time to time we may be able to wash it, filter the water and use it again for the same purpose."

"What happens if we find somebody taking more than their ration?" interrupted Agnes.

"We're all intelligent enough to realize that such an act would be detrimental to everyone."

"Yeah, but what if somebody does it anyway—what happens then?" She looked distrustingly at the women seated with her at the table. "I want it made clear right now just what will happen to any pig caught stealing."

Paul glared across the table at her, but he knew she was justified, for their very lives depended on the supply of food and water. His eyes moved around the table. "If you all agree, I suppose we can make laws and even hold trials for

any acts diminishing our chances of survival, although I feel they're highly unlikely."

Mrs. Spina looked coldly at Agnes. "Better make things clear now," she snapped. "Stealing's not beyond some people."

Agnes grinned confidently, having succeeded in planting the first seed of mistrust.

Throughout the rest of the meeting, she was silent as the women were broken into groups of four, each group assigned tasks to be rotated to another group, week by week. Lights were to be turned on each morning at six-thirty and remain on until eleven P. M. There would be ten minutes of calisthenics in the morning and specified times for each meal. Paul pointed out that there were plenty of books, general and technical, which could be used for study or for leisure reading. Young Mary Richardson could be tutored by anyone who had time and inclination, or teach herself through the books available.

When the meeting concluded there was general optimism. The women, with things now put in order, understood what they were up against, and Paul himself had decided to keep a diary. It wasn't until three days later that he made his first entry.

June 19

The broadcaster came on today. He was ill from radiation and said that this would be his last broadcast. He said he didn't know why, but he was no longer afraid. I understood. Once a man is certain what is to be, fear leaves. He introduced a priest who told us that although death was certain, it only begins a better life hereafter. I knew it was meant to console and it did, most of the others. Unfortunately I cannot believe. Finally the priest gave his blessing and our broadcaster came back on the air. He said for years he had had a secret yen to sing on the radio. He laughed and then began. His voice was terrible as he sang a

hillbilly song high and off key, but it moved me to the point of tears. When he finished he laughed again and cheerfully, as if going on a holiday, bade everyone goodbye. I somehow envied him, for he seemed without fear and at peace with himself. I feel a great loss knowing I will never hear his voice again.

June 21

There's someone out there. I don't know who but they're dying and I can't open the door and help them. That decision had to be made. It will haunt me for the rest of my life, however long that may be. It was about noon when the rapping started. It would be impossible to hear voices through the heavy door but we were so quiet that I could hear our breathing. Did we believe the intruder or intruders would go away if we kept silent? Ashamed, I must admit my first thought wasn't about the poor souls outside but of the danger they might bring inside. Finally the women turned to me for an answer. It was Agnes who told them we could not open the door. She was right; but I resented her speaking for me, implying she is better suited than I for leadership. Each day her manner becomes more obvious. I must be careful not to let her accomplish this.

The rapping stopped about six o'clock. It must have been someone who knew about the shelter. I wonder who? That young Marine guard? It could have been anyone: someone assigned to this shelter, or a friend, or even Janet and young Paul. I mustn't dwell on it for fear of losing my mind.

The following morning the rapping started again. It was more violent than the previous day. Paul worried, not that the intruders would break through the heavy door but that they might find the ventilation pipes in the street above. The pounding continued intermittently into the third day.

Agnes slammed her heavy hand down on the table. "For Christ's sake, how much longer are they going to pound on that stinking door?"

Paul looked up from his coffee, surprised to see Agnes rattled.

She shook her head. "They should be dead by now, goddammit. What the hell's keeping them alive?" She looked at the door, her lips drawn tightly over her large teeth. "They better not find them ventilation pipes; they just better not find them."

"Calm yourself, Agnes," he said. "There's nothing we can do about it."

"Don't tell me what to do," she shouted. "I'm not one of these prim madonnas. I don't have to listen to nobody."

"Just calm down."

"I've told you I don't listen to nobody. Don't you. . . ."

One of the older women jumped up.

"Oh, please stop it, stop it! I can't take any more of this . . . sick, I'm. . . ." Suddenly her hand shot up to her breast and she started gasping for air. Staggering backward, she fell over the bench to the floor. Paul, rushing around the table and crouching over her, found her eyes rolled up into her head and the color of her face gray-purple.

"She has a bad heart," said one of the women, standing behind him.

He immediately pressed down on her chest and a bubble of saliva rose to her mouth and burst, air from her lungs expelled in a low hiss. Then she lay perfectly still. For a few minutes he continued massaging the area of her heart. Then he placed his head against her chest, and after a moment looked up. "I'm afraid she's dead."

"Great. That's just great," said Agnes. "We don't have enough problems. Now, goddammit, we have a corpse on our hands."

Mrs. Sheldon, small, thirtyish, a friend of the dead woman, spun around and smacked her across her face. "You—you horrible woman!" she shouted.

In an instant Agnes had knocked her to the floor and locked large hands around the other's delicate throat.

"For God's sake, get hold of yourselves." Paul pulled Agnes off.

She yanked away and pointed a shaking finger down at the woman sitting on the floor with a stunned look on her face. "If you ever try anything like that again I'll kill you. And you better believe I mean that."

"All right," said Paul. "That's enough! Everyone's nerves are on edge. Let's all try and calm down."

He carried the dead woman to one of the spare beds and covered her with a blanket.

"What will we do with her, Paul?" asked Mrs. Spina. "I mean how. . . ?"

"I'll take care of it." he said. The thought of what had to be done sent a chill of panic to his bowels.

One of the women said in a frightened voice, "We'll all die if we open the door."

"We have to push her through the toilet," said Agnes in a coarse voice. "Cut her up and push her through the toilet, that's what we gotta do."

There were moans and gasps.

Paul fixed his eyes on Agnes. "Must you be so callous, so insensitive?"

"She's dead, ain't she?"

The pounding on the door stopped and the shelter was quiet, dark except for the light in the bathroom. Paul had waited for more than an hour after the women went to bed, but as he carried the corpse toward the lighted room he could feel their eyes watching. In the bathroom he laid the woman on the floor and stripped off her clothing. Then he went into the storeroom and got a large knife and a hacksaw. Returning, he closed the door and looked grimly at the heavy-set woman on the floor and then at the opening in the toilet bowl. A sour taste rose from his stomach. He crouched down.

"It has to be done," he whispered to himself as he lifted

the flabby leg and placed the knife behind the knee. The knife moved back and forth. His hands became sticky with the thick dark blood. The sound of the hacksaw ground against bone, over and over, like the monotonous rhythm of a train, blood-covered hands forcing the severed parts through the narrow opening in the bowl until he heard the dull splash as they struck the liquid chemicals below. He turned and looked down at the mutilated corpse, his body breaking into a clammy cold sweat. The inevitable nausea that followed emptied him and left his mouth bitter with bile. He seemed to be suffocating in the closeness of the room. He whirled around and slipped on the bloody floor, falling upon what remained of the woman. For an instant he froze as he felt the cold flesh of her face against his.

A moment later he was leaning outside the door. In the dark he made his way to the table and sat down, the blood still pounding against his temples. After a few moments he heard someone moving across the room. The bathroom door opened and in the light he saw Agnes, naked except for panties stretched over huge buttocks. She entered and closed the door behind her.

Paul cursed himself for his squeamishness. The woman was dead, only lifeless flesh that would decay and stink to high heaven. He knew it wasn't the mere cutting of flesh that sickened him; it was because he saw himself being mutilated. Doesn't each man see his own death in the death of others? He rose from his seat, walked to the bathroom and opened the door. Agnes was on her knees hacking away at the corpse. She looked up, her large breasts spotted with blood and hanging in front of her like sacks of water.

"Go on back and sit down," she said, "I'll take care of everything."

"I'm all right now. I'll finish it."

She stared at him for a moment, then turned and continued her butchering.

"I said I can manage now," he repeated.

She acted as though she didn't hear him and after a few minutes he left the room.

For what seemed like hours he sat there in the dark listening to Agnes' grunts, the slapping of flesh against the concrete floor, the cracking of bones. Finally, the bathroom door swung open and she stood in the light, her body smeared with blood, knowing all eyes were upon her. Then she stripped off her panties, poured some water in a pan and started to clean herself. Looking over to the bunks she pointed at two women who lay staring.

"You two," she ordered, "get out of bed and clean up the mess in the bathroom!"

Neither one stirred.

"I said get out of bed, goddammit," she repeated moving toward them. The woman in the lower berth stood up but the woman above shook her head and cried, "I can't. I can't do that. I just can't."

"You'll do it, all right." Agnes snatched her by the hair and dragged her out of the bed.

"Leave her alone," shouted Paul. "I'll clean up."

"No, I told her to do it," Agnes said pulling the crying woman toward the bathroom.

He moved slowly toward her. "Let go of her, Agnes." His voice had turned icy cold.

She stopped and stared at him for a moment, not frightened but weighing the situation. Then she grinned and released the woman. "O. K., Bub. You clean up the mess. That's what you're good for. You didn't have the guts to do what had to be done. I did it." She looked defiantly into his face as she resumed wiping her body. Then she threw the wet cloth at his feet, turned, crossed the room and climbed into her bed.

He stood there for a moment, in a room completely silent. Then he picked up the rag and the pan of water and went into the bathroom. A little later Marian entered and knelt down beside him to help clean the blood-stained floor.

"It's quite normal for a person to get sick doing what you had to to," she said in a gentle voice after a few minutes.

"I know that," he replied sharply, not looking at her.

But in his mind he also knew that Agnes had moved a step toward leadership of the group, a situation he feared more than anything else. For a new society was being formed within the shelter, and its leader would determine whether it be governed by reason or fear.

After that night Agnes addressed Paul as Bub, openly showing her contempt. The rapping on the door stopped. Morale in the shelter was low but the weeks passed without incident.

VI

By August first all but one of the six New Zealand shelters were completed. Their width averaged twenty-four feet, height twenty feet with close to two-thirds used for storing the tons of supplies, leaving a seven-foot high living space for the occupants. The supplies were covered with a floor of plywood panels that could be moved and adjusted as the food was consumed. The living space was divided into areas for teaching, working, sleeping and dining, and except for bathrooms no partition was higher than five feet for ventilation purposes.

One small section of one shelter contained four calves, four sheep, four rabbits and seven chickens. The precious space taken to house and feed the animals could have been used to save human lives but the planners, looking beyond the two years, felt the sacrifice worthwhile. One day the survival of those in the shelter might depend on the animals.

The shelter entrances were sealed off by two separate layers of heavy plexiglass sandwiching a high lead content between. As soon as a shelter was completed selectees assigned to it were transported to camp sites immediately outside. Already seventy-three thousand of the ninety thousand selected had been moved to the camps.

Noon that day was shadowy with dark clouds moving over Wellington and a cold rain blowing down the mountain slopes from the south. Lights already shone from Parliament

Building windows. Inside, the Prime Minister slowly put down the phone and looked over the group at the long table in front of him. The men there sat quietly, studying his face. Finally he said in a low, sober voice, "I summoned you all here because word has come that Australia is receiving a steady increase of radiation. The level has tripled in the last hour alone."

"Good God, it's finally come," whispered one.

"We've had seven weeks of preparing for this and so far everything has gone as expected. The radiation shouldn't reach us for better than a week, but we can't count on that." He looked at Pritchett. "How long before you're finished at the Tawa tunnel?"

"I'd say just about now except for fumigation and laying in the rest of the supplies. Perhaps eighteen more hours."

The Prime Minister nodded, then looked long and quietly at the men seated at the table. "This will probably be the last time we shall all be together and I wanted to tell you how grateful I, the country, and all those in the shelters are for your outstanding job. It will not go unrecognized by any who survive." He paused. "I am quite aware that most of you will not be going to the shelters, and that there is no possible payment for your sacrificing the precious little time you had left to spend with your families and loved ones. God bless you, and thank you."

Everyone was silent for a moment, then the Prime Minister looked at Douglas.

"Is everything in order, Bill?"

"All electrical work is finished and programmed to last five years."

"I hope that won't be necessary."

"Sorry," Douglas mumbled, embarrassed.

Along with the Prime Minister, Bill Douglas—though unfortunately not his one eligible child—had been selected for the shelter. He had wanted to refuse, but his wife Elizabeth wouldn't hear of it. "If it's God's will that you should live, then you must." She had repeated it over and over until

finally her persistence won out. That had been six weeks ago, and since that time Parker had not seen Douglas smile once.

"Listen, Bill, why don't you go home?" said the Prime Minister. "If anything turns up we'll call you there."

"Are you quite sure I won't be needed?"

"Not for awhile, anyway. Go ahead, and give the family my best."

Douglas quickly left the room, and Parker turned to Pritchett. "Why don't you take my helicopter and get over to the tunnel? We have to have that finished as soon as possible."

"Right." Pritchett and his assistant got up and started for the door.

"Check in every few hours," called McBride.

John Graves was in charge of transportation. His job entailed the transporting of the selected citizens by buses and trucks from designated pickup points to the shelters. The pick-up date had previously been set for the morning of August 11, three days away. The Prime Minister turned to him now. "I'm confident you have everything in order, John?"

"Yes, we're to start moving them on August 3rd," Graves replied. "That is, if you don't feel any changes will be necessary."

The Prime Minister nodded. "No, the third should be quite all right. But just in case, have the transports standing by." He looked at his watch. It was 2:15. His eyes moved to McBride. "I shall want to address the nation at six o'clock."

Mac went into the adjoining office to inform the broadcasting system.

The Prime Minister's cabinet had already been reduced to five men chosen from among the fifty-six members of the House of Representatives; the remaining representatives adjourned to allow him the mobility of making on-the-spot decisions.

One of them asked, "Is there anything to be done for Australia? I mean, can we help the poor devils in any way?"

"There's nothing we can do, I'm afraid," said Parker. "I spoke to their Prime Minister this morning. They should be sealing themselves into their shelters in a few hours. We're keeping in constant communication with them." He rose to his feet. "If there are no further questions. . . ? Well, good luck to all of you."

A few minutes later everyone had left the room except General Ward, whose job was the security of the shelters. The Prime Minister wasn't particularly fond of him, but he was a professional and could be counted on in a tight situation. The General looked austere as he sat frowning and puffing on a cigar, his catlike eyes following Parker as he paced, then stopped and faced the older man.

"As you know, General, disaster studies in the past have shown that most human beings will act rationally when sufficiently prepared for a disaster. Our leading psychiatrists believe that our citizens will do so. They tell me that there will be a feeling of helplessness, a few will panic, but that most will accept the situation."

"Oh, I believe New Zealanders will act like men right to the finish," interrupted the General in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Well, I don't know, General, but I hope you're right. We've never been faced with anything like this before. There's no telling how people will act. There will be men watching their families die right in front of their eyes. Can you imagine what that will do to their minds?"

"But the pills will be available to everyone."

"Yes, but many of the Catholics will refuse to take them. And not only the Catholics. In spite of the inevitable, it's against all human instincts to take one's own life. And your troops shan't be able to take the pills. They'll be required to stand guard over the shelters til the very end." He paused and walked over to the window. "I'm afraid it may be quite messy at the end."

A few moments passed in silence as the Prime Minister stood looking out the window. Finally the General cleared

his throat. "I think you'll find that New Zealand people will act honorably, sir."

The Prime Minister turned and nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, you're probably right. But if anything happens to me, I am commanding you to protect those shelters at all costs. I can't emphasize how important that is. Those shelters must be protected."

"It's quite clear, sir; I understand."

The Prime Minister walked over to the table. "I should like to think no action will be necessary," he said, the uneasiness gone from his voice. "There are no more meetings scheduled but I shall expect you to keep in touch with me or the deputy Prime Minister from now on in."

The General rose to his feet. "Very good, sir. Thank you for having confidence in me."

They shook hands and the General left.

Shortly after, Mac re-entered. "Will you be going home now, sir?"

"No, I'll wait until after the broadcast. How about you?"

"I shall be staying at Parliament Building. I only have my son, and he's in Australia, you know."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Yes. He's been living in Sydney for the last six months. Spoke to him and the grandchildren yesterday on the telephone. He was supposed to ring me tonight, but. . . ." He paused, his voice growing hoarse. "It's only right he be with his own family now."

Parker leaned back in the chair. "You know, Mac, you would have made a fine Prime Minister."

McBride gave Parker an embarrassed smile. "Did you know I mildly resented you at first? But now, looking back, I can say it's truly been an honor serving with you."

Parker looked gently at the small man. "Thank you, Mac—thank you very much." Then he looked at his watch. "Listen, old chap, I have some time before the broadcast. Why don't you find Paddy and I'll get a bottle of scotch and the three of. . . ."

"Do you think you should? I mean the broadcast and all. Forgive me, but you know you're a boy when it comes to drinking with the likes of Paddy and me."

Parker laughed. "Why, you two old frogs don't know what drinking is."

"Then you had better get two bottles," chuckled Mac as he started toward the door.

After he left the room the smile faded from Parker's face. He knew the Prime Minister couldn't allow himself to get intoxicated. And yet there was never a better time or reason for a man to get drunk.

The dark of night had just set in when the Bentley pulled into the Prime Minister's driveway. Parker knew it would be better if he moved Cynthia and the children into their apartment in Parliament Building, but Cynthia loved their home and he felt they could stay in it for at least a few more days. The car came to a stop and Paddy started to get out, but Parker patted the large man on his shoulders. "Sit still, Paddy, I can manage. I'll see you in the morning."

In front of his home one of the security guards was talking to a woman holding a small child. As the Prime Minister approached she tried to get by the guard.

"What seems to be the trouble?" asked the Prime Minister.

"I can handle it, sir," replied the guard.

"Oh, please, let me speak to you," cried the woman. "I won't take much of your time, sir."

The guard started to lead her away.

"It's all right," said Parker, and when the guard released her she came running up to him.

"Oh, thank you, sir; thank you."

The Prime Minister smiled gently.

"It's my boy, sir. He's only five but he's smart and very strong. I know you have rules, sir, but he's so small and smart and he doesn't eat much." She laughed nervously.

"It's rather odd that he doesn't eat much, and him being so strong and all, but it's true, sir. Oh please, can't you take him with you?" she sobbed. "He won't take much room. I have seven children. Can't you take just this one, please?"

The Prime Minister gently touched the child's face. "I'm . . . I'm so very sorry, but there's nothing I can do. You see, it's not my choice to make. Neither of my children has been selected, so I understand how you feel. There's nothing I can do."

The woman continued hysterically, "But how much room would my son take? Look at him, he's so small. You could take him if you wanted to. For the love of God, please!"

"I'm truly sorry," he said as the guard came up, took the woman's arm and started to lead her away.

"What kind of man are you?" she shouted. "Don't you have a heart? What kind of man are you?"

The Prime Minister turned and walked toward the house.

Cynthia opened the door. "I heard shouting. Is something wrong, Richard?"

"Nothing," he said as he led her inside, closed the door and kissed her. She held him tightly for a moment and he could feel her body trembling. Then she turned quickly but he pulled her back and tilted her face toward his. It was a strong face, with high cheekbones and large dark eyes, a mouth wide and full, with perfectly even white teeth. Dark skin and thick, deep-brown hair gave her the appearance of being Italian or Greek rather than English. Her eyes avoided his but he could see she had been crying and was about to ask her if anything was wrong when he realized the ridiculousness of the question. Better not say anything. He hung up his coat and followed her into the living room, where Cathy ran across the room and leaped into his arms.

"Daddy, Daddy, I saw you on television today."

She was fortunately too young to understand. He kissed her and looked at his son who sat on the floor putting a puzzle together. "Hi, Richard. How did it go today—did you play any football?"

The boy, dark like his mother but with his father's features, looked up. "No, Mother had me peeling potatoes and helping her today."

Parker turned to his wife, who said, "I let Mary go today. She has a family and I thought it best."

"Yes, yes; quite right," he answered promptly. She turned, walked into the kitchen and he shouted, pretending to be cheerful, "What are we having for dinner?"

She didn't reply and again he thought it better not to say any more.

He spent the next hour talking and playing with his children. At dinner Cynthia continued to be silent. A few times he caught her staring at him but always, when their eyes met, she quickly turned away. That night when the children were asleep, she came to bed and lay beside him.

"Would you like to talk?" he asked softly.

She shook her head, reached back and turned the light off. Then she clung to him tightly.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered.

And when he told her how much he loved her she only held him more tightly and said nothing. He lay there for a very long time in the silence and the dark. As the hours passed he came to realize that no matter how close two people are, they cannot be one; and there was now a thin wall of finality separating him from her, for one would continue to live, the other die. Perhaps if one of the children lived a part of her would go on, but that wasn't to be. He so desperately wanted things to be different. He wished he could comfort her in some way, any way. He thought of their religion, but in spite of its promises couldn't bring himself to speak of them to her. It would be she who would have to accept the hard reality of death. A great sorrow tore at his insides. More than the sorrow of his own loss it was knowing the fear she felt, a fear he was helpless to relieve. He touched her face, felt there her warm tears and could think of nothing more to say. What was there to say? Finally, just before dawn, her arms loosened and she slept.

A few hours later his son shook him. "Dad, wake up, wake up!"

"What's the matter?" the Prime Minister asked drowsily.

"There's a crowd of people outside shouting for you."

"What?"

"There's a crowd of people outside," repeated the boy.

Cynthia woke. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," said Parker as he slipped into his robe and hurried into his son's bedroom at the front of the house. He looked through the window; there were about a hundred or more men and women all chanting, "We want the Prime Minister!"

Three security guards stood on the front steps trying to quiet the crowd who, upon seeing their Prime Minister open the window and lean out, became quiet. One of the guards looked up.

"We're sorry, sir, but they came about thirty minutes ago and. . . ."

"What's going to happen to our children?" shouted a woman from the crowd.

"Yeah, what about our children?" called another. Then they all began shouting again.

The Prime Minister held his arms in the air. "Quiet, be quiet!" The shouts turned to mumbles. "You all know what the rules are. There's nothing I can do—there's nothing anyone can do. We're all facing the same situation. I also have children." His voice became softer. "Believe me, I understand only too well how you feel, but you must be civilized. Please go home and spend what little time you have left with your families. Please!"

Just then a truck with soldiers pulled up and they started dispersing the crowd.

Cynthia tapped him on the shoulder. "McBride is on the phone," she said.

He picked up the hall phone. "Mac?"

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes, everything's all right."

"I sent a truck of soldiers out. Did they get there yet?"

"Yes, thanks, Mac. Where are you now?"

"At Parliament Building. They started gathering here about six-thirty. About three or four hundred people, I'd say. I think the crowd's going to get a lot larger."

"Did you get in touch with General Ward?"

"No, I thought we could handle it from here," Mac said.

"Has Pritchett finished at the Tawa tunnel yet?"

"Spoke to him at six this morning; they were just finishing laying in the supplies. Everything should be finished by now, I'd say."

"Now listen carefully, Mac. I want you to call General Ward and tell him to get to Parliament Building as soon as he can. Call Pritchett and John Graves of transportation and tell them to report to my office immediately. If you have to, send a copter out for them. I'll be at the office in less than an hour. Oh, be sure to wake my cabinet up, I'll need them."

"Are things going badly, Richard?" Cynthia asked in a calm voice.

He took her in his arms. "I don't know, dear, but I want you and the children to stay inside today."

"Can't we come with you, Richard? We shan't be in the way."

He held her at arm's length. "Are you afraid?"

A slight smile passed across her face. "Not now," she said. "It's just as you said, about having so little time left. We'd like to be with you."

He smiled. "Get the children ready and call Paddy." Then he kissed her lightly and hurried into the bathroom. When he came out his clothes were on the bed and a cup of hot tea was on the night table.

"Mac is holding on the phone and Paddy is here," said Cynthia as she slipped his robe off and started drying the beads of water from his back.

He picked up the phone. "Hello, Mac."

"Yes, sir. General Ward is here and Pritchett and Graves are on their way."

"How's the crowd?"

"Getting bigger. I called the broadcasting system and asked them to stop reporting on its numbers. I felt the news might be attracting others to come."

"Good thinking," said the Prime Minister.

"They want to know if you will be going on the air again."

"Tell them to set something up at Parliament Building. I'll broadcast from there."

Twenty minutes later they arrived outside Parliament Building. There was a large crowd in front.

"Should I drive to the back of the building?" asked Paddy.

The Prime Minister looked angry. "You drive me right up to the front, Paddy!"

One of the two security guards said, "Don't you think it better we go to the back, sir? We can't tell how that crowd will act."

"Drop me in front, Paddy, then drive Mrs. Parker to the back." He looked at the two security men. "Both of you stay with my family." He knew both men were only looking after his safety, but he thought he'd be damned if he'd sneak in the back way.

As soon as the car pulled into the driveway it was surrounded. Cathy started to cry. Her mother quickly quieted her and Parker leaned over to kiss her tenderly.

"Now come on, darling, you be a big girl. Remember you're the Prime Minister's daughter." Then he pushed open the door and stepped out. One of the security men started after him. The Prime Minister looked at him sternly. "I asked you to stay with my family."

The man hesitated for a moment, then stepped back and closed the door and the car pulled away.

A path opened for Parker as he climbed the steps. A silence hung over the crowd, finally broken by a man who yelled, "Look here, what are you going to do with us? Are you going to let us die?"

Parker continued walking straight ahead. One middle-aged woman stepped in front of him, her face twisted into

hard and bitter lines. "It's all right for you—you and your family will be safe in the shelters. How about us?"

He stood there looking straight into her face until she backed away into the crowd. Just then some soldiers broke through and surrounded him. When he reached the top of the steps he turned and faced the crowd which, by degrees, became quiet. For a long moment he stood there without saying anything. Finally, in a strong voice, he shouted:

"For the love of God and your country go home! Be men—go home with your families. There's nothing anyone can do. Go home!" He turned and entered the building and the shouting started again. Inside, armed soldiers darted back and forth in the long hall. By the door stood the Governor General and a troop of former Representatives.

"Good morning, Mr. Prime Minister," said the Governor General. "I see the citizens are reluctant to listen to anyone."

"They're just frightened and they've good reason to be." He looked at the Representatives. "What are you gentlemen doing here? I should think you would want to be home."

"Heard the news and thought we might be able to do something," said one of the men.

"Good of you, but there's nothing, I'm afraid."

"We'll be around just in case we can help."

Parker started toward his office, the Governor General beside him, asking "How's Cynthia taking it?"

The Prime Minister wondered if they were inside yet. "She's taking it as best she can," he said, sensing the Governor General had something on his mind.

"It's a shame so many women and children will have to die. Such a waste."

Parker stopped and stood facing him. "What the hell are you trying to say, Collins?"

"Nothing, I just. . . . Well, look here, Richard, this is ridiculous—you're the Prime Minister and you have the right to take your family with you in the shelter. Good heavens, man, you've done more for the country than any

other man. You know rank has some privileges."

Parker looked straight into his eyes. "And how about you and your family?" he said, concealing the contempt he felt.

The Governor General looked nervously about him, aware of the curious eyes of the men down the hall. "What's a few more people, anyway? I'm sure the shelter can hold a few more. I know this must sound terrible, but I feel I'm entitled. My whole life has been dedicated to the people."

"And what about the Representatives and their families—and their sons' and daughters' families?" he said, now showing his anger.

The Governor General's mouth twitched nervously. "Everyone wouldn't have to know. I mean. . . ."

"I know what you mean and you disgust and frighten me. You're supposed to know better. It makes me wonder what the people outside are thinking." Parker turned to walk away, but the Governor General held his arm.

"Don't get excited. I. . . ."

Parker yanked his arm loose, looked at the man pityingly and said in a heavy voice, "Go home, Collins, and try to be brave if you can."

He entered his office. Mac, General Ward, and the Prime Minister's five-man cabinet rose to their feet and waited while he went to the phone. Once assured that his family was safe, he sat down and faced them.

"Pritchett and Graves should be here any moment," said Mac.

There was a knock on the door and a security guard stuck his head in. "Excuse me, sir, but there are some people here from the broadcasting system."

Mac started for the door. "I'll take care of it, sir."

When the door closed the General said, "Looks like I may have been wrong about the New Zealand people."

"I hope not, General," said Parker. "I imagine it's quite normal for people to get excited at a time like this. I'll talk to them on the broadcast today."

The General's austere appearance was gone now, replaced

by a tired, puzzled look. "Twenty per cent of my troops deserted last night. First time I've ever seen anything like that; first time." He took great pride in his troops. "Can't understand it. I mean, they were volunteers and knew what was expected of them and then to just desert like that."

The Prime Minister was more concerned than he let on, for much depended on the military should things go wrong. "How much of a problem will this present?"

"Oh, not much," said the General. "We still have over a thousand men. But if we lose any more I'm afraid it might be a problem."

Just then Pritchett and Graves entered the room with Mac behind them.

"Sorry, but we got here as soon as we could."

Parker waited for everyone to be seated. "I called you all here because there is going to be a change of plans. It will require that we work fast. First of all, I want to get everyone into the shelters by tomorrow morning."

Graves half jumped out of his seat. "By morning, did you say?"

"Yes, and we'll have to move them as inconspicuously as possible. There should be no problem with those already camped outside the shelters; the problem will be moving the seventeen thousand to the Tawa shelter. I think it best to move them sometime after midnight." He looked at Graves. "I know that's a big order, but I'm afraid the crowd might get worse tomorrow."

"I agree," said the General.

"But how will we get in touch with everyone? Many don't have phones," said Graves.

Parker turned to the General. "We'll need a few hundred men to use as messengers."

"Of course," he said.

Parker looked back at Graves. "Call those who can be reached by phone and make it clear to them that secrecy is of the utmost importance."

One Representative from his cabinet said, "You realize

this whole thing can backfire on us if the rest of the citizens think we're trying to pull something over on them." He shook his head. "I just don't know."

"What do you say, Mac?" asked Parker.

"I think it's worth the risk."

"We'll go along with that," said the other men from his cabinet.

"Then it's agreed," said Parker. He turned again to the General. "I want three-quarters of your troops dispatched to the shelters, and if you need more men I'm sure the fathers of those children in the shelters would be willing to help."

"I think it would be better if they didn't," said the General. "They would only be in the way."

"Whatever you think best," replied Parker. He stood up. "Now remember, no one is to know about this outside this room except those who have to be informed." He glanced around the room. "Well, that's it. There's a lot to be done, so let's move."

An hour later the Prime Minister was on television and radio asking people to stay off the street, but by noon the crowd had swelled to thousands. Though they were nonviolent, barricades were set up around Parliament Building and religious leaders asked to talk to them over loud speakers. By dinnertime the crowd had thinned, and when night set in most had dispersed, except for a few small groups.

A fine rain was falling a little after eight when the two sedans pulled up to the Prime Minister's house. The light in the living room was on. Security men, with raincoat collars turned up, stood under the small overhang on the doorstep. Two men from the first car hurried back with opened umbrellas for the Parkers. The children walked under one but the Prime Minister, feeling worn and tired, waved off the other man, preferring to walk in the rain. The night air was heavy, with the smell of sea in it, and he inhaled deeply, gulping down the freshness that felt cool and good inside. He faced the sky and let the rain fall quietly on his face. God,

how he would miss the rain! He loved it and would miss it. That was selfish—he was thinking only of himself. He felt guilty when Cynthia took his arm and snuggled close as they silently walked to the side of the house. Then he stopped and faced the sky again, opening his mouth as if trying to catch the rain.

She smiled. "You're like a boy at times."

He looked down at her face. "All men are like boys at times," he said softly. Then they stood there looking into each other's faces, capturing that moment of understanding when no words are necessary, while the rain fell gently upon them and the smell of the sea surrounded them.

"Come on, Mother," called young Richard. "You'll catch a cold."

How absurd to worry about catching a cold now, she thought. But the absurdity made her remember and brought a flutter of fear.

The guards stepped out from the shelter of the doorway lintel as Parker and his wife approached. "Good evening, ma'am; evening, sir," they said, tipping their hats.

"Why don't you both come in and let me make you a cup of hot tea?" said Cynthia.

"Why, thank you, ma'am, but I think it would be better if we stayed out here," said one of the men.

"Oh, it's all right," said Parker, taking his arm and leading him up the steps. "There's plenty of guards and you two look like you could use a cup of hot tea."

Once inside the two men went with Cynthia into the kitchen while the Prime Minister called Mac, who reported that out of the seventeen hundred to go to the shelter, there were only slightly under a hundred whom they hadn't been able to reach.

Cynthia was pouring the tea when the Prime Minister came into the kitchen and the two men sat talking to the children. Parker went to the cabinet and brought out a bottle of scotch and a bottle of Irish whiskey. "Will you gentlemen join me in a drink?" he asked.

"Oh, we couldn't," said one, staring at the Irish whiskey.

"No, we can't, thank you," said the other.

The Prime Minister poured a large drink for himself. He lifted the glass to his lips, then smiled. "What if I insisted?" he said.

"Well, if you insisted," said the first man quickly and in a voice louder than he intended. Parker let out a hearty laugh and then everyone started laughing. He poured both a good two ounces.

"How about me?" asked Cynthia. "I think I'd enjoy one, too."

Throughout their marriage Parker had seen her take alcohol only twice. "Why certainly," he said, placing another glass on the table. "How would you like it?"

"Straight."

His smile broadened. "Yes, indeed," he said as he poured out a half ounce.

"Come on, put a little more in there," she said.

He poured another ounce. "How's that?"

Without answering she lifted her glass and then they all lifted their glasses. "Cheers." Parker stood waiting for her reaction, but if the scotch bothered her she didn't show it.

Their daughter Cathy broke the silence. "How about a drink for Richard and me?"

With that everyone laughed again and for the next fifteen minutes Cynthia was her old self, laughing and joking with the two men. The men teased the children and showed them pictures of their own children. Finally they got up to leave.

"Thank you, ma'am, for having us in. I'd say it was very kind of you."

"Oh, you must come again and bring your families with you next time," said Cynthia.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then a sad smile came across the face of one of the men. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll tell my wife you said that. I'm sure she'll be delighted."

After they left Cynthia said, "Richard, there are so many nice people we haven't met and I shan't ever have the chance

to meet them." Then she began to clear off the table, Parker noticing that her voice held not fear but a touch of sadness. He knew then she had accepted it, and he was as happy as the moment allowed.

Before ten Cathy fell asleep and he carried her upstairs to his and Cynthia's bedroom in the rear of the house. Then he waited for his son to finish in the bath, after which he tucked him in and sat on the bed beside him.

"Son, do you know what will be happening to our country in a few days?"

The boy looked to assure himself that his sister was asleep before turning to his father. "You mean about the radiation fallout, Dad?"

"It will be here very shortly."

"Yes, I know, Dad," he whispered. "But Cathy doesn't. Mother and I have been keeping it a secret from her."

"I think that's best, son. Tell me, are you afraid?"

"No." Then he shrugged. "Well, maybe a little."

"Everyone is a little afraid, but you're a big fellow now and I'm going to ask you to do a man-size job. All right?"

"Sure, Dad."

"You know I've been selected to go to a shelter." He hesitated. "I would do anything if I could bring you and Cathy and Mom with me, but you see, it's not up to me. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"You see, I won't be around when . . . when the end comes. I'd like you to promise me you'll try to be brave and not let your mother know if you're afraid. That would help a lot. Do you think you can do that?"

"Dad, don't worry. Cathy, Mother and I will be waiting for you in heaven."

"Sure you will." Then he sat looking at the boy. The thick brown hair, still damp, stuck to his forehead as if pasted there. His youthful skin was smooth and tan. So young, so very young, he thought. "I know you're a big fellow now, but do you mind if I kiss you?"

The boy reached up and Parker embraced him. Then he said goodnight and quickly left the room. Once in the bathroom he shut the door and turned the shower on. As he undressed he caught sight of himself in the mirror, surprised to see the tears that rolled down his face. It was the first time since his childhood that he had cried. He sat on the edge of the tub and let it all come.

When he came downstairs in his robe, the living room lights were out and a fire burned cheerfully in the fireplace. He was relieved that the lights were out; he had been worried that Cynthia might notice his eyes were red and swollen.

"Are the children all right?" she asked.

"Both asleep in our bedroom."

She turned a log and then put the screen in place. "I thought you might have forgotten me," she said slowly and in a heavy voice.

He saw the bottle of whiskey on the coffee table. "Oh, you've been drinking."

She closed one eye and chuckled, "Just a nip, darling."

He lay on the couch. "See what you've been missing all these years?"

She came and sat beside him. Her thick brown hair fell across her face as she leaned over him. "Have you grown tired of me?"

He laughed. "I think you're a bit tipsy."

She sat up and pushed her hair back. "I am not, and for that I think I'll have another drink."

He tried to hold her, but she pulled away and crossed the room.

"You know, Richard, I'm sorry about last night, I should have been consoling you." She smiled. "But I am going to be all right now."

"Let's not talk about it."

"Let's not."

She drank down a full ounce, then went to the window and closed the drapes. When she came back to him her eyes were heavy and unmistakable in their meaning. Her mouth

hung slightly open and her tongue moved delicately across her lips, making them moist. She reached back behind her and her dress fell to the floor, exposing her nakedness. He looked up at her, his eyes delighting in her lovely body. The flickering flame of the fire seemed reflected on her smooth skin as she slowly moved closer, her sweet smell filling his head. Then she leaned over and slid her trembling hand beneath his robe, and he uttered a deep soft sound as her fingers gently caressed him. While still holding him she slid down beside him and whispered huskily, "I want you in me, I want you." His mouth found hers and they made love while the fire danced and crackled in rhythm. And for a short time all thoughts of duties and radiation and death seemed very far away.

Just before midnight the phone rang, waking him. He got it before the second ring.

"Hello, Mr. Prime Minister?"

"Yes, Paddy—what time is it?"

"Eleven-fifty, sir. Will you be coming out now?"

"Give me ten minutes, Paddy."

He hung up and slid softly off the couch so as not to wake Cynthia, dressing quickly and going upstairs to check on the children, fearing the phone may have awakened them. When he came down he covered Cynthia with a quilt. Outside he looked up; the sky was clear and starry and a cold wind was blowing. A security guard greeted him. At the curb two cars were parked, Paddy holding open the door to the Bentley, security men occupying the second car. He got in without a greeting and the two cars pulled away. Immediately he called Mac on the car phone. Everything was going as scheduled. Paddy, sensitive as always, remained silent as the Prime Minister gazed out into the darkness.

"You know, Paddy, since I was a child I've wanted to be the Prime Minister of this country. But now for the first time in my life I wish I weren't. When the time comes I still don't know how I'll be able to leave Cynthia and the children." He

paused. "Damn it, I won't! There are other men who could take my place."

"Indeed, there are," said Paddy. "But you'll go, sir. You'll go because, like you said, you always wanted to be the Prime Minister and that's because you believe you're the best man for the job. Just your not wanting to go proves that. There'll be a lot of people feeling better knowing you're running things. Yes indeed; you'll go and thank God for that." He glanced back at Parker. "You're just feeling a bit down, sir."

Then both men kept silence until the Bentley halted in front of Parliament Building. When Parker stepped out of the car he turned and looked into the older man's face, his grave expression relaxed. "Thanks, Paddy." Then he turned and hurried up the steps into the building.

The Prime Minister stood in his office for an hour, then, growing restless, had Paddy drive him out along the coast highway. He stopped at a pick-up point and from the window of the Bentley looked out at the people who came quietly, like thieves in the night, parents embracing and whispering to their children, trying to say so much in the few moments left. Soldiers with flashlights and lanterns checked their credentials and sadly separated them, parents reaching out to touch their children just one more time as they boarded the bus. The glow of the lanterns showed the sorrowful faces to the Prime Minister, aching with compassion and the knowledge of his own agony to come, as the buses pulled away. And then sobbing and weeping, heads cast downward, the parents slowly disappeared into the dark as quietly as they had come.

At six-thirty A. M. the Prime Minister received word that the last bus had arrived and everyone was secure in the shelters. He sat back in his chair, a look of relief on his face. And although he did not know it, he had been right, for on this new day the horrible panic would begin.

VII

The phone rang five times before it woke her.

"Cynthia, are you all right?" asked her husband.

It took a moment for her to gather herself together. "Yes, Richard. But oh, do I have a headache! My drinking days are over," she chuckled in a hoarse voice.

"Where are the children?"

"Asleep, I imagine. I'm still on the couch."

"Is there a crowd over there yet?"

"Wait, I'll see." She wrapped the quilt around her naked body and walked to the window. "There are only about ten or twelve people," she said when she came back to the phone. "Is something wrong, Richard?"

"Nothing to get excited about, dear, but I want you to do as I tell you. Call one of the guards and tell him I want to speak to him. Then you go upstairs and dress the children. You had better pack a bag with some extra clothing. When you come down there will be a car waiting to bring you here to Parliament Building."

"Won't we be coming home again?" she asked, her voice beginning to show concern.

"I don't think so, dear. Now it's important you do as I say right away."

"Yes, Richard." She hesitated. "Richard?"

"Yes."

"I love you."

Later when she came downstairs with the children she took a moment to look at the house one more time. The house that she loved. She stood in the living room and

looked at the deep green wall-to-wall carpet. She looked at the couch and the gray ashes in the fireplace. Then she sighed, turned, and left without looking back. Thirty minutes later they arrived at the back of Parliament Building and joined Parker for breakfast.

He tried to be as cheerful and kind as he could, for he suspected it might be their last breakfast together. He was attentive to everything the little daughter on his lap said. Every few minutes he would hug and kiss her. His son asked if he could go outside and stand with the soldiers, and the smile disappeared.

"Richard, I want you to stay by your mother from now on," he said sternly. Then he reached over and ruffled the boy's hair, his voice gentle again. "I know how you feel, son, but remember our little talk." He managed a wink and a look of understanding spread over the boy's face and he nodded.

Mac entered, greeted Cynthia and the children, then turned to the Prime Minister. "May I speak to you privately, sir?"

"I'll see you later in the day," Parker said to Cynthia, following Mac into the hall.

"We received a call from Australia," said Mac. "Half their army has deserted and riots are breaking out all over the country. Wanted to let us know what to expect."

Parker shook his head. "It appears the psychologists were wrong," he said wearily, surprised at his own calmness.

They entered his office and he looked out the window, shocked by the size of the crowd. Already thousands had gathered and more were coming. There was something strange about the crowd, and after a moment he knew what it was. Everyone out there was surprisingly quiet. They stood silently, looking up at the building.

General Ward entered the office. "That crowd is going to get a lot larger before this day is over," he said. "I don't know if we'll be able to control them if they get out of hand."

The Prime Minister turned from the window. "What do you suggest we do?"

"I think it best that we call some men in from the shelters," said the General.

Parker's voice turned icy cold. "Damn it, don't you understand there is nothing more important than those people in the shelters. They come first above everything else." His voice rose to a shout. "Now don't forget that, General!"

It was the first time in years that anyone had spoken to the General in that manner. He started to say something but instead turned and walked out of the room.

"Don't you think you were a bit rough on him, sir?" said Mac. "He's only thinking of our safety."

"No," Parker snapped coldly. "He's supposed to know better. The whole damn point is to protect those in the shelters. Everyone else will be dead in a few weeks, anyway."

"If I may ask, sir—when will you be going to the shelter?"

Parker didn't answer that, asking instead, "Besides the soldiers, how many police and government guards do we have left in Wellington?"

"I believe a hundred, take or give a few," replied Mac. "When will you be going to the shelter, sir?" he repeated.

Parker was seemingly annoyed. "When the time comes, Mac—when the time comes." He walked back to the window. "Have there been any reports of violence?"

"None yet."

"Thank God for that, anyway."

But at that exact moment along the waterfront a mob of angry men moved toward the Russian submarine, the leader calling people they passed to join them. "Come on, let's get the Russians! They're the ones responsible—they started the war!"

Two sailors stood at the gangway watching the mob approach. It took a moment before they realized its intention, but they had hesitated too long and were caught before they could get below. Within moments people were swarming onto the ship.

The Captain, hearing the commotion, came out of his stateroom to demand, "What are you men doing aboard my ship?"

The mob leader rushed through the hatchway, club in hand. "Here's what we're doing ," he yelled, the club crushing the Captain's frail skull. He was dead before he hit the floor.

The struggling sailors were dragged out to the dock where hundreds of men, women and children stood waiting. When they saw the Russians they started chanting, "Kill them, kill them!" One man with a knife knocked a barefoot sailor to the ground face down, stuck his knee into the small of his back and with one hand pulled the sailor's head back by his hair, the taut neck arching upward. Then, with the other hand, he slit his throat with such force that he nearly decapitated him. The mob let out a cry that was a mixture of horror and delight. This madness, the screaming and the blood, seemed only to add to the man's frenzy; he got up and turned to a second sailor whom two men held firmly, a boy no more than nineteen. His face went white and he started to scream and kick, his mouth snapping at the men who held him. Then, realizing his struggle was in vain, he started whimpering like a baby.

"How brave is he now?" shouted a woman who held an infant in her arms.

"Where's your balls now, Russian?" yelled a teen-age boy.

The man with the knife looked into the boy's face, then leaned down and started pulling his trousers off. The Russian, beyond struggling, just stood there limp, dazed, his chest heaving with deep sobs. Then his eyes widened and he let out a horrible scream as the knife slashed across his testicles.

An hour later two policemen stood in shocked horror at the sight of the naked mutilated bodies of the sixty-eight Russian sailors strung up by their feet along the side of the ship, blood still dripping from their lifeless forms. Some

were without heads, others were disemboweled. All were castrated and all were dead.

The crowd, larger now, moved like cattle through the streets, senselessly looting and setting fire to the buildings behind them, their delirium growing. And then some turned on each other.

In one deserted building, some teen-age boys gathered around a middle-aged woman who submitted willingly to them while her young child sat watching a few feet away.

In doorways and deserted cars men and women feverishly, as if for the last time, had sexual intercourse. Women who resisted were raped. One toothless old man nervously looked about him as he struggled in vain to lift a blond teen-age girl lying unconscious beside a car, then started pulling her by her arms into a building, wearing the possessive look of an animal dragging away its prey. When the girl's eyes opened and she moaned, he banged her head on the cement until her hair became sticky with blood. Then, his body shaking with expectancy, he dragged her into the building.

On one street corner, behind a barricade set up to divert the mob from the direction of Parliament Building, policemen stood nervously waiting with rifles and machine guns, but without the slightest hesitation the mob continued to advance. When they came within fifty yards the police fired, first tear gas, then a stream of bullets that tore and splattered the flesh and bones of hundreds. The savage thousands behind stumbled over the bodies, their faces twisted in rage and madness, until finally they swarmed over the police like hungry wild animals.

One policeman managed to get back to his car. "Send help!" he shouted frantically. "There are thousands of them. Oh, my God, they spotted me! They're coming! Send help!"

But no help would come. The remaining force was needed to defend Parliament Building where the crowd had in-

creased to over a hundred thousand, coming in from farms and ranches, from towns and the smaller surrounding islands, all hoping, although they had been told there was no hope. No violence erupted in this crowd. Maybe because Parliament Building represented authority or because they felt those inside the building would at the last moment find some answer to their dilemma. The sky darkened and it started to rain and the people stood there waiting, quietly waiting.

"Richard, get away from the window," said the Prime Minister.

"But they're all standing in the rain, Dad. They're going to catch their death of cold standing out there like that."

"I know, son, but there's nothing we can do about it. You see, I've spoken to them, but they refuse to go home. Now, come away from the window."

The boy drew a long breath like any restless child. He crossed the room and flopped down on the leather couch beside his mother and sister. Cynthia smiled, reached out and pulled him to her.

"Why don't you take a nap, son?" she said very tenderly. Her thumb and forefinger lightly moved over his eyelids, then down his face to his lips, just as she had so often caressed him since his infancy. Parker sat staring at her, his eyes reflecting the deep love and sorrow he felt.

"You're a wonderful woman, Cynthia," he said softly.

"Am I wonderful too, Father?" asked Cathy.

He laughed. "Indeed you are, darling. You're the most wonderful little girl I know."

Just then Mac knocked and stuck his head in. The Prime Minister got up and went into the adjoining office, closing the door behind him.

"We just received word that the mob on the other side of town overran the police barricade and is headed this way. Auckland and Christchurch also reported mob violence and asked for help. In fact, it's breaking out everywhere: Hast-

ings, Dunedin, Hamilton, everywhere. General Ward feels it would be best if you left now. Without more men it will be impossible to stop that mob."

"Anything new from Australia?" asked Parker.

Mac shook his head. "Only that things are steadily getting worse. They're quite concerned about the safety of their shelters. I'd say with good reason." A puzzled look came across Mac's face. "It's rather strange when you think of it; I mean how everyone started reacting the same way at about the same time. Yes, quite strange."

The Prime Minister was looking out the window at the crowd. "Poor devils, they don't know what to do. Maybe it's my fault; maybe I could have done more." He turned, an absent-minded look on his face. "If only we had more time, just a little more time."

"What more could you do?" said Mac sternly. "You've done everything humanly possible. For six weeks you indoctrinated them with what to expect. Do you think it would be any different if you indoctrinated them for a year?"

Parker raised his hand. "All right, Mac, all right," he said wearily.

Mac's voice softened. "It's just that I wanted you to know that I feel no man could have done better. No country could carry out such a plan without the cooperation of its citizens."

"You speak as if you think all's lost."

"I don't know what to think any more."

"Well I do, and the first thing I intend to do is to get whatever troops we have here back to the shelters."

"But what about Parliament Building?"

"To hell with it. Only the shelters matter now."

The phone rang; it was General Ward.

"One of our helicopters spotted a crowd moving toward the Kaimai shelter. The road has been blocked off from traffic but the pilot said there are a few hundred people moving on foot. From what he can observe they're not armed." He paused. "Has the deputy Prime Minister told you about the

mob overrunning the barricade?'' Without waiting for Parker's reply, he continued. ''It's not safe to stay here any longer, sir. When that mob from across town reaches here something has got to give.''

''How many helicopters do we have?''

''Eleven altogether. One fifty-man troop carrier and your private copter standing by on the roof deck. The rest have been circling over the islands.''

''How long before you can get another troop carrier down here?''

''I'd say ten minutes,'' replied the General.

''Tell him to get down here as fast as he can, I want to pull all the troops out. As for now, get fifty of your men and meet me on the roof. We're leaving.''

He hung up and turned to Mac. ''Look here, Mac, I don't have to tell you how hard it is for me to go to the shelter. I would like you to go with Cynthia and the children to our summer home at Whangarei Harbor. It would make it a lot easier if I knew you were with them.''

A frown came across Mac's face. ''But I'll be needed here, Richard. I'd feel like I'd be running out. I appreciate your asking me but. . . .''

''There's no time to argue, Mac. There's nothing more you can do here anyway; I'll be handling everything from the shelter.'' He looked pleadingly into the small man's face. ''Do this for me, please.''

Mac let out a sigh, then nodded.

''Thank you, Mac.''

Both men went into the adjoining office where Cynthia was still sitting on the couch with the children.

''Cynthia, you and the children are to go with Mac to the roof. I'll join you in a few minutes.''

''Where are you going?'' exclaimed Mac.

''Outside. I'm going to try to talk to the crowd once more.''

''Be careful, Richard,'' said Cynthia.

''Don't worry. I'll see you in a few minutes. Now get

going.'' In the hall he passed the soldiers who were hurrying to the roof. At the entrance the General grabbed him by the arm. ''Where are you going?'' he asked excitedly.

''I'm going to try to reason with them once more.''

''There's no time for that—we have to go.''

Parker's gray eyes narrowed into slits as he looked angrily at the hand on his arm. The General released his grip, then turned and hurried away.

Outside, the multitude now extended as far back as the eye could see, countless men and women, holding their children in a quiet desperation, seemingly indifferent to the heavy downpour of cold winter rain that drenched their bodies. A minister standing in the cover of the doorway was reading from the Bible into a loudspeaker, his voice barely audible above the sound of the rain. Seeing the Prime Minister he stepped aside. The Prime Minister moved to the loudspeaker and stood there for a moment before he spoke.

Finally he shouted, ''For those that hear me, pass on what I say. As your Prime Minister, I beg you to go back to your homes. Tell those behind you to go home. There is no one to turn to now except your God. Ask him for the courage to face what must be.'' He paused. ''You must go home now.''

But no one stirred. They just stood there motionless, like statues; white and gray faces with pleading eyes reaching out to him behind a curtain of rain.

''For God's sake, go home!'' he shouted. ''If you don't, you'll be hurt. You'll be killed. Don't let panic blur your reason. Go home, I beg you!''

But still no one moved. They continued to stare at him as if he were a God and held the power to save them. On every face, from every direction, their inescapable eyes burned into his brain until he felt almost hypnotized. Then someone placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that it was Mac.

''You better go now, sir. Cynthia and the children are waiting for you.''

''But, Mac, what. . . .''

"I've made arrangements for a copter to pick up Mrs. Douglas and her family. They'll stay with Cynthia at your summer home." Mac's voice was calm and strong with that relaxed tone that comes when one has made a final decision.

Parker looked into his face and knew at once it would be pointless to argue.

"You *have* to go, Richard."

"But what will you do, Mac?"

"I'll try to talk to the people." He took Parker's hand and shook it firmly, and a warm smile lighted his face. "I want to say goodbye, Mr. Prime Minister. Good luck and God keep you safe."

Parker responded with a sad smile, then turned and hurried to the roof. A few minutes later both helicopters took flight. From above, Parker saw Mac with outstretched arms talking to the crowd. He also saw the smoke from a burning building farther up the street and the mob that moved steadily toward Parliament Building. He looked once more for Mac but with the helicopter climbing and moving swiftly away, he could no longer distinguish him from the crowd.

Thirty miles north of Wellington the Prime Minister's helicopter set down at the Rimutaka shelter, the General's copter continuing north to the Kaimai tunnel. The pilot turned off the engine and left his seat. Outside, Douglas and a group of men stood in a light drizzle waiting for the Prime Minister, while the silence in the plane grew deafening as everyone sensed the wrenching moment of departure. Parker sat facing his loved ones.

"I'll have to leave you now," he said in a low, soft voice. "If it's at all possible I'll come up to the harbor and see you again." He felt a numbing emptiness and a constriction in his throat.

"Don't worry about us. We'll be quite all right," said Cynthia, biting her lips to hold back the tears. He kissed and embraced all of them and then climbed slowly out of the plane. The pilot and the two security guards boarded and the helicopter lifted off. He stood there, his eyes straining after

them until the plane disappeared behind a mountain and the sound of the engine faded and they were gone.

Douglas came up and stood beside him. "It's a bloody stinking world, isn't it?"

Parker turned and looked at him. "It's not the world, Bill. It's only the foolish people in it," he said grimly.

White pine and beech trees lined both sides of the highway that ran over and down the slopes from the south. The road leveled off where the Prime Minister stood and there, three hundred yards ahead, cut into the gray-brown mountain, was the shelter. A hundred yards out and surrounding the shelter was a barbed wire fence. Behind and running parallel with the fence was a long trench with machine gun posts and spotlights. Farther back within the confines of the fence were the brown and green tents that housed the military assigned to protect the shelter.

The air was still and damp and hung heavy with the smell of wild grass and pine trees. As Parker walked toward the shelter he felt in full measure the consciousness of loss. The gray loneliness closed in on him and he did not speak to the men who walked beside him until they neared the fence. Finally he said, "Are all radio communications working?"

"Yes, sir," replied Thomas O'Rourk, the man who would be Parker's radio operator while they were in the shelter.

"What of Wellington? Have you heard anything from Wellington?"

"Last we heard from them was that you were on your way out here. I'll check when we get inside, sir."

A soldier opened the wire gate and stood at attention as Parker and the group passed through. Now he could see the glow from the lights inside the shelter. As he moved still closer he became aware of the shadowy faces behind the wall of transparent plastic and glass. For a moment he stood looking up. Then, with the quiet reluctant tread of a criminal entering a prison, he stepped inside.

He surveyed the narrow four-foot square clearance surrounded by walls of supplies. Then he climbed a stationary

ladder that led up to the living quarters, and upon entering that level was greeted by the cheers of the occupants, who crowded around the entrance. The shelter was over five miles long and, although most of the people could not see him, word soon spread that he had entered, and they shouted a deeply felt spontaneous welcome. For they realized they owed their very lives to this man, the leader who had lifted the burden of their survival from their shoulders to his own. Their faces reflected their respect, gratitude and even love. Standing there in the midst of their cheers he understood and felt the full weight of his obligation. He forced a smile to his face and waved to them and then asked to be led to his quarters.

It was a small room by ordinary standards, only eight by eight feet, but it was the largest space given to any one person in the shelter and was simply furnished with a bed, locker, two chairs and a small desk. On the wall by the bed was a phone and to the right of that a sink and a mirror.

"Two years," mumbled Parker to himself as he looked about. "Two long years." He sighed, shook his head dejectedly and started to undress. He had just stepped out of his damp clothing when the phone rang.

"I called Wellington, sir," said O'Rourk, "but there's no answer. I'm afraid I've got bad news. A message came in from the helicopter assigned to pick up the remaining troops from Parliament Building. Sorry to tell you, sir, but the pilot reported the mob overrunning the place. I've instructed him to report here. Will there be any orders for him, sir?"

"No, no orders," said Parker in a toneless voice. "Just call me when he arrives." He slowly put the phone down, his mind recalling the sight of Mac standing with outstretched arms, pleading with the people; Mac who had stayed, although he thought it hopeless for anyone to carry out such a plan without the cooperation of the citizens. "How do we reach them?" he whispered to himself. "How do we reach them and make them understand?"

Thirty minutes later the pilot and co-pilot stood in front

of Parker and the other men seated at the conference table.

"It was terrible, sir . . . terrible," said the pilot in a nervous voice.

"I would appreciate your starting from the beginning, Captain," said Parker.

"Of course." The Captain paused for a moment, composing himself. "As you know, we were instructed to pick up the remaining troops from Parliament Building. Well, as we were coming in for a landing I could see the mob merging with the edge of the crowd. I set the helicopter down on the roof of the Parliament Building and waited but no one came. After a few minutes Lieutenant Davis, my co-pilot, got out and looked over the side of the building." The Captain turned to his co-pilot.

"The people were swaying back and forth like a field of wheat in the wind, sir," said the lieutenant. "Everyone was screaming and pushing. I saw women and children being crushed. . . ." He pushed a lock of hair back from his forehead. "It was hard to believe you were really seeing people dying. What I mean is. . . . It wasn't anything fast, mind you, but rather like a horrible scene in slow motion. The crowd would sway one way and then you saw some of them slowly slide down to the ground and then others would stumble on top of them and more on top of them and you knew they were being crushed and trampled to death. It—it was a bloody awful sight, sir."

"Did you see the deputy Prime Minister?" asked Parker.

"Yes, sir. He was standing behind the line of soldiers and policemen yelling something into a microphone. Don't imagine anyone could hear him, though, with all that screaming going on. But I know how he felt; you had to try to do something. I kept yelling to the soldiers, 'Up here, look up here, we're waiting for you.' No one heard me. They just stood their ground with their rifles at the ready until finally the mob burst forward and overpowered the poor devils. There could have been shooting but I don't remember hearing any. When I saw the mob rushing into the building I hur-

ried back to the copter. That's when I saw the Governor General; he was trying to climb aboard. I helped him in and then we got out of there as fast as we could."

"And none too fast," added the pilot. "As we were lifting off I saw a group of men running toward us."

"You said the Governor General?" asked Parker.

"Yes, sir. He's here in the shelter now."

Parker nodded, his grim face concealing any emotion and response. "Did you see the deputy Prime Minister again?"

"No, sir."

Parker thanked both men, and after they left he summoned O'Rourk.

"Have you heard anything from General Ward?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; they're still in flight. They should set down at the Kaimai shelter in ten or fifteen minutes."

Parker stood up. "Inform all the shelters to prepare for a state of emergency. I suspect the mob may be moving to the shelters by morning. I want our helicopters circling within 25 miles of every shelter and a report of any movement of people in their direction." He walked across the room and stopped at the door. "Someone find the Governor General and ask him to come to my quarters."

"Please sit down, Collins," said Parker formally when the Governor General entered.

Collins immediately went on the defensive, having been in the diplomatic service too long not to suspect the irony in Parker's voice. "I know what you must be thinking, Richard," he said as he seated himself. "But what was I to do—just let the mob kill me?"

"Oh, I don't blame you for getting out of there—don't blame you at all. It wasn't your responsibility to stay there. In fact, you shouldn't have been there in the first place."

A look of relief came across the Governor General's face. "Of course, you're right, but it's a consolation to know you understand I'm only here by chance. I thought you might have believed I connived a way to get out here."

"No, I wouldn't think that, knowing you understood you wouldn't be permitted to stay in the shelter."

The Governor General stared at him in shock. "Can't stay here, did you say? Where in heaven's name do you expect me to go now?"

The Prime Minister leaned back in his chair. "I should think you would want to be with your family," he said in a calm, even voice.

The Governor General's face reddened. "Confound it, Richard, you seem intent on making me seem like some monster. Is it so terrible to want to live? Did you expect me to meekly walk out there and say, 'Here's my life—take it'? They would, you know. I'm just being logical, seeing things for what they really are. The bloody people don't give a bloody damn about anything but themselves. I admire nobility, indeed I do, but I've seen how that pays off. I saw the Deputy Prime Minister trying to talk to that mob and they just pushed him down and trampled over him and they'd do the same to you and me. I'm not like that, I'm. . . ."

"Shut up!" the Prime Minister shouted, jumping up from his chair. "Shut up, you bloody ass! Don't try to cover your cowardice with platitudes and logic. Eat or be eaten—that animal logic brought about all the wars. It's men like you who care only about their own pitiful lives who brought us to this—men of high position who should have sacrificed, set an example. Instead you force every honest man to mistrust, to carry a weapon to protect himself from the likes of you." Parker's eyes narrowed and his voice turned low and cold. "If there is one person in this entire country who doesn't belong in this shelter, it's you." He turned, crossed the room and picked up the phone. There was a moment of silence, then he said, "Send a guard to escort the Governor General out of the shelter."

The older man screamed, "You can't do that—you can't—you—you'd be a murderer!" He sprang toward Parker with the look of a madman.

The Prime Minister stepped aside and slammed Collins against the wall, the blood pounding angrily in his temples, all the frustration of the last months churning inside him. He felt the urge to punch and tear and beat senseless the man who slid to the floor and crouched there, whimpering. Parker took a deep breath and stepped back as the guard entered.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

Parker nodded toward the Governor General. "Take him out of the shelter," he said wearily.

"Where to, sir?"

"Anywhere, just get him away from the shelter."

"No, no! Don't do it, Richard, don't send me out there! I don't want to die!" He stumbled on his knees toward Parker. "Please let me stay—let me stay—I can help—I'll do anything, *please*!" He covered his face with his hands and began to cry and mumble to himself.

Parker, his anger now subsiding, looked down. "For God's sake, pull yourself together, man." He bent over and helped him to his feet.

The Governor General held one hand over his eyes. His hysteria was gone but his thin hair was disheveled and his bearing was that of a sad and broken old man.

A wave of compassion passed over Parker. He smoothed the older man's hair with his hand and said, "Come on now, you're still the Governor General, you know."

Collins didn't answer or take his hand from his face, but he had stopped crying. A few moments passed in silence, then Parker nodded to the guard. "See that he gets back to Wellington safely."

The guard took the Governor General's arm and led him slowly out of the room. Then there was silence, or as much silence as one could expect within a shelter housing seventeen thousand people. Parker sat down at the desk, feeling totally alone and exhausted. In the past, when the strain of governing got him down, he could always escape to his family and be rejuvenated. It was hard for him now to ac-

cept the sad fact that he would never see Cynthia and the children again. He had foolishly hoped to fly to the harbor in the morning, but that was hundreds of miles away and he realized the impracticality. And yet there were so many things he still wanted to say. Could it be over just like that? Like parting at a train station? It was as if she and the children were already dead.

How would it be the end for them? What would he be doing at the moment they took the pills? How would he know when they died? Yes, yes; he must know that for certain. He would have to arrange for someone on the outside to be there to verify their deaths. He visualized Cynthia and the children lying across the bed while someone waited at the door for the death ritual to take place. How horribly clinical! Yet he knew that he must know for certain.

Accept it. Accept it! One must, if one were to go on being a fit leader for all the others in the shelters facing the same tragedy. A leader *must* set an example, be stronger, or at least act stronger than the rest. He opened the drawer of the desk and took out pen and paper. He had just started to write a letter to Cynthia when, after a light knock on the door, O'Rourk entered and stood with a smile on his face.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but we just received word that your family arrived safely at the harbor." He seemed honestly happy for the Prime Minister's sake. "Also word from General Ward. Those people moving toward the Kaimai shelter are just the families of the people in the shelter—only natural, I suppose. The General is now on his way back, sir."

"Thank you for bringing me the news, O'Rourk."

O'Rourk hesitated. "If I may, sir?"

Parker nodded.

"Perhaps everything will be all right, after all. That mob is a bad lot, all right, but there are a lot of good people left, sir. I should think it wouldn't be too difficult if you wanted to fly up to the harbor in the morning."

Parker was moved by O'Rourk's kindly concern. He

smiled. "I should have to give that some thought. And thank you again for bringing me the news."

O'Rourk started to leave, then turned. "Will you be having dinner, sir?"

"No, I'm not at all hungry."

"Very good, sir. I'll see that no one disturbs you."

After he left Parker spent two hours finishing the letter, making certain not to give Cynthia any false hope that they would see each other again. It was a long letter, written with love and tenderness which, when he read it over, satisfied him. He would send it in the morning with one of the helicopters. Then, mind weary, he laid his head on the desk and, surrounded by the muffled sound of voices that echoed through the shelter, fell into a heavy sleep.

He awoke at a time that would signal dawn outside. The red lighting used in the shelter to distinguish night from day made the room seem like something in a dream. It took him a moment to collect his thoughts. Then he stood up, knowing he would not be able to fall back to sleep, took some clean clothes from his foot locker and walked down the narrow hall to the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later he entered the radio room. O'Rourk was asleep on a cot and a second man sat in front of the radio reading under dull lamplight. Parker noticed a coffee pot sitting on a portable electric stove.

"How are chances of getting a cup of coffee?" he asked.

The man jumped to his feet. "Why, yes—yes, sir, but it's a bit strong."

"That's how I like it." The reply came in a low voice; he didn't want to wake O'Rourk. "Is General Ward back?"

"Yes, sir. He turned in a few hours ago."

"Anything new?"

"We lost Auckland and Hamilton during the night. I'm not sure, but I believe General Ward pulled the remaining police forces from the cities and had them report to the nearest shelter." He paused. "Should I wake the General, sir?"

"No, let him sleep. It'll be light in an hour or so." Parker took the cup of coffee. "I'll be outside if anyone wants me."

Two spotlights shone on the road and beyond, into the trees where a frosty morning mist floated on the air. He walked to the side, inhaling the freshness, finishing his cup of coffee. He placed the cup on a rock, then stood looking up at the sky. To the east above the mountains the horizon was turning a dull gray with the approach of dawn. What would the new day bring?

Then, from somewhere behind him, he heard a soft, firm voice. "It's an excellent time for a man to think."

He spun around to find the figure of a man sitting on a large rock.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," the man said as he climbed down, holding out his hand. "I'm Geoffrey Gardiner."

Parker shook his hand and studied the face. "Yes. Professor Gardiner, of course." He knew Gardiner to be at least sixty years old, but the writer and teacher he had so admired over the years looked much younger. "I wasn't aware that you were in New Zealand. I've inquired about you several times over the last few years, but you were always out of the country."

A sad smile came across Gardiner's face. "It seems I came back just in time," he said in a relaxed tone. "I was in America when you made your speech at the United Nations. It was brilliant. Too bad the great powers didn't listen." He sighed. "One of the sad faults of man is that he must experience before he learns, only you don't get a second chance with nuclear warfare."

Parker nodded and both men were silent. Finally Gardiner said, "I never quite understood what really happened. I've read what Russia's motivations supposedly were for exploding the bombs in the United States, but why did the rest of the world get into it?"

"It has always taken years before finding out what really caused a war, if you find out at all; but this time—should

those in the shelters survive—their future history books will only be able to speculate."

Some lights came on in the military tents a few hundred feet away, and after a moment there was a clanging of pots and pans.

Parker continued. "We never released the news to the public, but a Russian plane landed in Australia with a high-ranking general aboard; one of those flying command posts. It had been exposed to heavy contamination and the crew was already weak with radiation sickness, one lasting close to a week, the rest dying within twenty-four hours after landing. Australian army intelligence spoke to the General and according to him China was responsible for the whole blasted thing."

"I'm not at all surprised," Gardiner said. "For years their leaders openly stated that a nuclear war was inevitable. It was just a matter of finding a way that would allow a portion of the population to survive."

"Well, according to the General's stories, China almost pulled it off. Extraordinary, that it could have been started by reaching only the American Senator and one or two Soviet agents. But I shouldn't say that; it took more than that. There was still time for the Kremlin to use the hot line even if it were true that America planned an attack. The Kremlin could have warned them that they had nuclear weapons planted in their country. In any case it would have caused a standoff. But no, the setup took too many years to achieve and now they had an excuse. They had a lot to gain, all right. It's been calculated that with twenty-five million killed, it would take the United States ten years to make an economic recovery; with seventy-five million, over fifty years." He paused. "Yes, it took more than three men; it took greed and twisted, dedicated minds. With America out of the picture they could fulfill their dream of a Communist world with Russia at its head. Yes, the time was right for them to make their move. What they didn't know was that China was in

the background pulling all the strings, waiting its turn, figuring that no matter how things turned out, China stood to gain. Even to a bombardment from America, it wouldn't retaliate, but would let Russia and the United States fight it out, then when the time was right, step in. According to the Russian General, the Chinese found out about Russia planting bombs in the United States while they were themselves secretly building their own arsenal in the Tibetan highlands. They must have been planning the whole thing for a long time."

"I imagine it was a surprise when America didn't retaliate after the first bombing," said Gardiner.

"Yes, but they were also prepared for that. They just waited for Russia to admit their responsibility. China had a few of its own missiles concealed in Cuba."

Gardiner interrupted, "So, once Russia took the blame for the first attack, all the Chinese had to do was fire a single missile from Cuba. They must have known the United States would believe it was Russia again."

Parker nodded. "Exactly. And you can't blame the United States. With most communications cut they weren't going to try to figure who was responsible. That's the nasty thing about nuclear warfare, everything happens so fast. One bomb can inflict an intolerable number of deaths on a nation within minutes. It would take only one hundred-megaton bomb detonated at an adequate height to turn any city in the world into a flaming fire chamber. Only now Russia smelled a rat. Hadn't China taken Cuba under its wing over the last ten years? Russia didn't want to fight simultaneously both the United States and China, but it had no choice and sent a scatter of high megaton bombs into China, forcing the Chinese to discard their previous plan of waiting it out."

"China thought that Russia would be too busy fighting the United States," Gardiner said. "I mean, who would expect Russia to act so hastily?"

"Exactly. Russia couldn't be sure China was responsible, but in a nuclear war you just don't have much time to check

everything out. Besides, Russia knew for years it faced a showdown with China in the near future." Parker shook his head in disgust. After a moment he continued, speaking at a faster pace in order to finish the subject. "China's retaliation gave away its position in Tibet. The Russian detectors ranged in. By then British, French and American bases throughout Europe were firing on both China and Russia, who in turn were retaliating. My guess is that all of them tried to fire whatever weapons they had before they got hit. It was all over in two days, but by then it was already too late. And the irony of the whole thing is that everyone on the planet lost the war."

Gardiner shook his head. "Tragic. Before you came I was sitting here in the dark thinking how sad that man wasted his brilliant scientific achievements on his own destruction. If only we had made the same progress in understanding! People have been saying that for years, but we haven't really tried; not really. It's one hell of a price to pay." He paused. "Although man did not know it, when he split the atom the time was upon him to make the most important decision in the history of mankind. With this new source of energy, the great natural forces of the nucleus, he had in his grasp the means to enter an age that would rise to unimaginable accomplishments. He stood for a moment on the threshold of greatness. But his inability to detach himself from old ways, the ever-present mistrust and fear of man by man, impelled him to view his great discovery as a weapon to deter aggressors. Perhaps it was simply that we were not prepared for such a discovery. In a world of mistrust and fear how could anyone blame a country for using it as a deterrent? Yet, how could other countries trust that it would be used only to deter?"

After a silence, Gardiner said, "Of course the war was the culmination of man's inhumanity to man. The most tragic waste of all time. On the other hand, as cold as it may sound, it presents an ideal situation for building a better world."

He turned and pointed toward the shelter. "In there and in

the other shelters you have some of the finest brains in the country—scientists, engineers, teachers—all men of intellect and integrity. What a world you'll be able to build." His eyes were looking beyond Parker and he spoke as if to himself. "We must teach the children to love one another, to believe that all life is precious. Unfortunately, hate is part of man's makeup but that, too, can be beneficial when directed properly—against war and disease and all violence. Since the beginning of time, most of man's energies have been wasted in defending himself from his fellow man. But once that fear is gone and with the technical knowledge. . . . Oh, it will take years of work and struggle and patience, but we'll have the opportunity to stand on a threshold of greatness again and the second time it won't be denied us."

Parker, staring at Gardiner who seemed still lost in his own visions of the future, had a flash of thought that would change the destinies of both men. He took out a cigarette and the flame from his lighter caught Gardiner's attention. He turned and gave the Prime Minister a shy smile. "Forgive me for rambling on like that to you. I got carried away for a moment."

Parker raised his hand reassuringly. "Not at all. It's quite pleasant to hear someone speak optimistically for a change." He wondered if Gardiner knew about the theories that had the radiation lasting beyond two years. Certainly he must know, but why hadn't he mentioned it? Perhaps because it was better not to. After all, didn't the majority of scientists believe the radioactivity would last only two years? What good would it do to think beyond that?

The end of the cigarette glowed as Parker drew in on it, then flipped it to the ground. "Do you believe in a life after death?" He was surprised that he had asked it, even of Gardiner.

Gardiner seemed not at all taken aback. "I've often thought about a hereafter, but in all honesty I must confess that I doubt it."

Parker nodded. "My son once asked me the reason for

our being here. He asked that when he was only six years old and before any religious teaching. A pure and innocent question. I needn't tell you I was shaken by the depth of it. I told him about God and faith, but he still seemed puzzled. Finally I told him that when he grew older he would understand better. Later, when I was alone, I pondered the question, looking at it in the same light as the boy did, without formal faith. There seemed no answer, not really. Maybe there is no God. And yet, without believing in something beyond our lives, what purpose is there?"

He bent over and pulled a weed from the earth. "Are we just to live and die like this weed?" He held it in front of him and studied it in the gray morning light. He sighed and let the weed fall from his hand.

The mist lifted in a soft morning breeze and the sky lightened from gray to a whitish blue, revealing scattered small, odd-shaped white clouds. Parker and Gardiner remained at the side of the shelter, their conversation jumping rapidly from one subject to another, as if each were in a hurry to hear the other's views and test each other's minds. In that short period of time there sprang up a feeling of understanding and mutual respect that went beyond friendship.

The Prime Minister had just asked Gardiner to join him for breakfast when O'Rourk came hurrying out of the shelter toward them.

"Sir, there's a call from the Australian Prime Minister," he said excitedly. "He wants to speak with you, but you must hurry; his shelter is being attacked."

When Parker entered the radio shack, General Ward handed him the phone. He caught his breath and then said, "Hello, Australia! This is Prime Minister Parker." He could hear screaming in the background and then the Australian Prime Minister's high-pitched voice.

"Is that you, Richard—can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"I don't have much time, they're breaking into the shelter. Listen, Richard," he said hurriedly, his voice betraying ter-

ror, "you mustn't let it happen there. I made a mistake. I tried to reason with them—you can't, they're no longer people. They're terrified, mad animals. You must remember that and act accordingly—it's your only chance."

Just then the screaming grew louder and there was the sound of gun shots. Parker thought he heard the Prime Minister groan.

"Are you there?" shouted Parker. "Hello! Hello! Are you there?"

The Prime Minister's voice came back but lower than before. "I'm here, Richard. The mob has broken through. Not much time. Oh, for the love of God, don't let it happen there! If only you could see their faces!" His voice cracked. "It's horrible! God help you and. . . ."

The line went dead. Parker continued holding the phone for a full minute before handing it to O'Rourk and standing up. He glared, his troubled eyes stopping for a moment on each face: then he sighed and shook his head despondently.

"I'm afraid we no longer have Australia with us." O'Rourk crossed himself. Everyone else stood motionless. "I should think it would be wise if the news didn't go beyond this room. No point in alarming everyone." The Prime Minister looked at the General. "Naturally that doesn't apply to you; your troops must be informed of what to expect."

He beckoned to the General and together they started to leave the room. Gardiner still stood in the doorway. "I'm afraid there is the possibility that we may never get the chance to reach that threshold again," he said to him in a voice just above a whisper, while they looked at each other for a long moment.

VIII

The morning was spent making further plans for defending the New Zealand shelters. It now seemed inevitable to Parker that the citizens, through blind panic, would attack them. Certainly all those outside were doomed and they knew it. For two months they had been told what to expect. And yet, would man's final struggle mean taking every last soul with him? Was there some hidden force urging them to wipe the slate clean? Parker kept remembering the Australian Prime Minister's last words:

They're no longer people. You must act accordingly.

He shuddered with disgust as he envisioned hordes of men breaking into the shelter and trampling helpless children. He wondered if the Australian Prime Minister were dead or if he lay helpless in some dark corner, forced to witness the madness. It would be worse to be alive and not able to do anything. Parker's own sense of responsibility for the shelters far outweighed his fear of death.

By early afternoon one of the helicopters reported close to a thousand armed people moving toward the Prime Minister's shelter. A jeep with two soldiers was sent to find out if they were hostile. Fortunately the crowd turned out to be the families of those in the shelter; armed with weapons ranging from rifles to pitchforks, they were coming to protect it. When they arrived the soldiers tried to turn them back but they refused to leave. After some time the General decided to let them stay, on condition they were not to approach within five hundred yards of the shelter. They were further

warned that, in the event of an attack by a hostile mob, the soldiers would not be able to distinguish them and would fire on anyone who came within the five hundred yard boundary.

From inside the shelter the Prime Minister and his subordinates watched the people cut fresh trees and drag them across the road to form a barricade. Some of them waved in the direction of the shelter as if hoping some members of their families would recognize them. They didn't know that the Prime Minister had restricted the front area of the shelter, not wanting occupants to be aware of what was happening outside.

Standing there looking out at the industrious women and children, Parker thought of his own family and of the still harbor surrounded by the forest and mountain slopes, the happy lazy summer days spent fishing and swimming and basking in the sun with the children; then of nights when the cool of the harbor set in, the children were asleep, he and Cynthia sitting in front of the fireplace, talking or just listening to the quiet of the night. And of later, when they went to bed between sheets cold against the sunburned skin, and making love ever so gently. It was all so clear and yet seemed so long, long ago. He was glad he had sent her there. The harbor, quiet in summer, quieter now. A peaceful place to live . . . and die. . . .

Elizabeth Douglas was sitting on the sofa, staring at the flickering flames in the fireplace, when Cynthia entered the room carrying a tea tray.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, setting the tray down.

Elizabeth sighed softly. "Oh, nothing in particular; just thinking how quiet it is here." She pushed herself up from the sofa and walked to the window that overlooked the harbor. After a moment she said, "Cynthia, with the radio out, how will we know when the radiation arrives? I mean, who'll

let us know when to. . . ?" She turned, a frightened look on her face. "Good God, what if we gave the children the pills and the radiation never came?"

Cynthia walked across the room and put her arm around her. "We'll know when it comes. Richard told me what the symptoms are."

"Yes, but the tolerance isn't the same with everyone. Suppose. . . ?"

Cynthia tightened her arm. "Elizabeth, it's coming," she said firmly. "There's no use kidding ourselves." Then to further reassure her she said, "Don't worry; the guards will know."

Elizabeth put her head on Cynthia's shoulder. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just that I feel so helpless here. Forgive me."

Cynthia patted her gently. "I understand. Come now, let's have some tea."

They had no sooner sat down than they heard a helicopter approaching. They hurried to the window and saw it coming in over the harbor toward a clearing a hundred yards from the house.

"It's Richard! He's come!" Cynthia cried, running to the door.

The helicopter landed in a whirling cloud of dust. After a moment the pilot stepped out, alone. He crossed the field and was surrounded by the children, who jumped in their excitement, young Richard joining him as he approached the house.

When he reached the doorway Cynthia asked, "Will the Prime Minister be coming later today?"

The young pilot took off his cap. "I'm afraid not, ma'am." He reached inside his jacket. "But he sent you this letter, ma'am." He entered the house with Elizabeth and young Richard.

Cynthia opened the letter with trembling fingers and stood in the doorway reading and then rereading it, tears coming to her eyes. When she entered the living room the pilot had

just finished telling all that had happened since yesterday.

Elizabeth jumped up from the sofa. "I'm going back with you," she said to the pilot.

"What's happened?" asked Cynthia, alarmed.

"I'm sorry, but I want to go back with him—I have to. Please understand."

"Will someone please tell me what has happened?" demanded Cynthia.

"They're at the shelter," explained Elizabeth. "The families of those in the shelter are there protecting them from the mobs."

Cynthia looked at the pilot, who said in a troubled voice, "She doesn't understand. I can't take her—I have orders."

At that moment Cynthia could think only of seeing her own husband again. Even if only at a distance it would be worthwhile. She did not want to be denied the same privilege that the other women had, or to be hidden away in tranquil surroundings, to die alone. She thought of the brutality the children might witness, but for everything there is a price, and she decided. She looked at the pilot. "Nonsense, we're all going." She turned to Elizabeth, "Hurry, get the children ready."

The pilot, angry for putting himself in such a predicament, was stuttering, "But—but, ma'am, I have my orders, I can't. . . ."

"Of course, of course, you can."

"Listen, young man," Elizabeth said, "have some respect! This is the Prime Minister's wife, you know. You just sit there and wait—we won't be long."

The pilot shrugged. And twenty minutes later all were aboard the helicopter heading for the shelter.

The people had come to every shelter throughout the day. By six o'clock Parker estimated there were over two thousand outside his, and similar numbers were reported from the other five shelters. In order to feed them patrols were sent out to gather livestock from the surrounding pastures,

all blankets or extra clothes that could be spared were given out, and every effort made to make them as comfortable as possible.

The Prime Minister and Gardiner walked among the people, surprised by their high spirits. Occasionally someone would ask about his child or brother or someone in his family and be assured that everything was fine. But deep within him Richard Parker had a vague feeling of guilt, for he hoped most of all that the radiation would arrive soon, which would mean the death of all outside the shelter. The scientists had told him that once the heavy radiation arrived it would only be a matter of a day or two before its effects would be felt. At most, some of the people might last a week, although they would be terribly sick, but no longer than that. It was a dreadful thing to hope for, but better than what he suspected lay ahead if the radiation didn't come soon. When he returned to the shelter he went to the radio shack and was talking with the General when Douglas burst in.

"Mr. Prime Minister, may I speak to you?"

Parker walked out into the hall. "What's wrong?"

"It's Elizabeth and Cynthia—they're here!"

"What? How in heaven did. . . ."

"They came on the helicopter you sent to the harbor. The pilot is young and they bullied him into bringing them, and tried to make him promise he wouldn't tell us they were here."

The General came out to the hall. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"No, everything is all right." He turned to Douglas. "Where are they now?"

Without another word both men hurried out of the shelter. They walked across the field between the shelter and the barricade, their bodies casting long narrow shadows in the glaring brightness of the spotlights. Hundreds of campfires extended back into the woods on both sides of the road and the air was heavy with the scent of barbecued meat.

The people at the edge of the first camp stood up when

they recognized the Prime Minister. He greeted them and motioned them to sit down. He and Douglas moved to the next fire, and the next, and finally, after more than an hour of searching, came upon their families. It had been only one day of separation, yet Parker's heart punded with as much excitement as if he were a soldier coming home from a long war. Young Richard was the first to see him.

"Dad! Dad's here!" he shouted, running to his father to be embraced.

Cynthia sat on a log holding Cathy, asleep in her arms. For a moment Parker thought she was going to cry but then her lips forced a smile. He walked over and gently touched her face, then looked down at their daughter. Cynthia started to wake her.

"Let her sleep," he said softly; "I'll be staying awhile." He gently lifted his daughter, kissed her and then laid her on the blankets that were spread out in front of the fire.

Douglas was being smothered by kisses from his wife and children and for the first time in a month, Parker heard him laugh. The last time had been after the fateful dinner at his house.

"Will you be staying with us now, Dad?" asked Richard.

"For awhile, son." He ruffled the boy's hair. "Now you sit here beside your sister; I want to speak to Mom for a minute. All right?"

The boy nodded and sat down on the blanket.

Parker took Cynthia by the arm, walked a few yards from the fire into the shadows of the trees and embraced her. They clung to each other silently. Finally he managed to whisper, "Why did you come, Cynthia? Why did you have to come back?"

She placed her fingers on his lips. "Because I wanted to be near my husband."

"But the children. . . ."

Again she pressed her fingers against his lips. "If only you saw how happy they were when I told them we were coming to see you. Don't be angry with me, darling. I'll look after

the children. If things begin to get bad I'll—I'll take care of everything."

"I'm not angry with you—how could I be angry with you? I love you. It's only. . . ." He was overcome with despair. There was no remedy, no answer. He pulled her tightly to him. "Oh God, why does it have to be like this?" He held her at arm's length, the strain of the last days cut into his face. "Do you realize that I can't take you into the shelter? Even for tonight, I can't take you inside the shelter."

She smiled a little sadly, unafraid. "It's all right, darling. I understand. It's enough to know you're near."

At that moment, more than ever before, he realized how deeply he loved her and how empty his life would be without her. He took her hand and walked back to the fire. "Are you hungry?"

"No, we brought some food with us. But if only we had some tea."

Parker returned to the shelter, informed the General where he would stay the night, and returned with O'Rourk carrying blankets and supplies. That night the two families huddled around the fire, and in spite of the terror that lay in wait the night passed cheerfully, much faster than anyone desired.

Early the following morning the Prime Minister was called to the shelter. General Ward was waiting at the entrance.

"I have good and bad news," he told Parker. "First the good news, if you can call it that. There's a slight increase in the radiation reading. We should get the heavy stuff in a day or two at most."

Although it would mean his own death, for there was no practical reason for saving military leaders, the General actually seemed pleased that the radiation was coming. Parker noticed and felt sorry that he had once thought ill of the man.

"As for the bad news, our helicopters report mobs moving toward the Kaimai and Tawa shelters."

"Perhaps it's more of the families," Parker said hopefully as they entered the shelter.

"Not this time, I'm afraid. They took some pot shots at the helicopters. Of course, it's still possible that they won't attack the shelters but I'd rather not take any chances. Envoys have been sent to try to reason with them. If that doesn't work, I think it best to hit them before they reach the shelters. I've sent two helicopters with thirty armed soldiers to the Kaimai shelter. I gave Kaimai first priority since it's the largest. Not many soldiers, I'm afraid, but they all have automatic weapons. Best we can do under the circumstances."

Parker nodded. "Yes, I think it a wise move."

O'Rourk looked up from the radio when they entered the room. "Glad you're here, General. The Christchurch and Lyttleton shelters just reported large angry crowds gathering outside. They asked if we can send any help."

"No, that's impossible," he snapped. "Tell them they'll have to manage on their own. Tell them we're all in the same spot." He turned to Parker, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Poor devils; wish I could help them. Bloody bad luck, everything happened at once. Somehow the people must have found out about the increase in radiation."

"Any word on the envoys?" asked Parker.

"Nothing yet, sir," replied O'Rourk.

The General started pacing back and forth. "Nothing we can do now but wait." He shook his head and said again, "Poor devils; wish we could send some help."

Parker got a cup of coffee and sat down on the cot.

O'Rourk looked up at the General. "It's the helicopter, sir. They're coming in over the mob now."

The General took the microphone and switched on the intercom. "Helicopter one, this is General Ward speaking. What's your location? Over."

"This is helicopter one, Captain Kane speaking. We are approximately ten miles from the Kaimai shelter. Over."

"How large is that mob? Over."

"They run back a few miles. I'd say roughly twenty thousand or more. What are my instructions? Over."

"Make a pass and fire a few rounds in front of them. Be careful, Captain; they're reported armed."

The General lit a cigar and nervously puffed. After a few minutes the same voice came over the intercom. "This is Captain Kane. Completed two passes but it didn't do any good, sir. They're still moving in the direction of the shelter. Waiting further instructions. Over."

"Captain, you are to make one more pass. If they do not stop. . . ." He paused and looked at Parker, who stared back at him for a moment, then slowly nodded his head, "then you are to fire into the mob. Over."

"Fire into the crowd, did you say? Half of them are women and children, sir. Over."

"Captain, do as I say. Make one pass, and if they don't stop, then fire on them. That's an order!"

A dead silence fell over the radio room as they waited.

Parker lit a cigarette, took one puff and put it out. He looked up at the second hand on the clock. It had stopped. No, it was moving. The mob will turn back—they have to. Women and children. They have to turn back. It's not the same as being outside a shelter, they're on a road, defenseless. They have to turn back. That bloody second hand stopped. No, it's moving. Think clearly! Women and children, women and children. Only the shelters matter. They'll all be dead, anyway. *Can't you take him with you, he won't take much room. He's so small, please, sir, please, sir.* Only the shelters matter. They're no longer people—they've become animals. Must act accordingly—shall have the opportunity to make a new world—to stand on that threshold again—won't be denied us.

A voice came over the intercom like an explosion. "This is Lieutenant Simmons of helicopter two, calling Rimutaka shelter. Over."

"Helicopter two, this is General Ward. What happened to Captain Kane?"

"Captain Kane has crashed. He made a pass over the mob and was fired upon and crashed. The copter burst into flames on impact. As far as I could see no one got out. Waiting instructions. Over."

"Lieutenant, you are to follow the instructions I gave Captain Kane. You are to fire upon the mob. You must do everything you can to divert them from the shelter."

Twenty minutes later the helicopter, its ammunition gone, headed back to the Rimutaka shelter, leaving behind it sprawled along the road, an incredible number of bodies. The soldiers in that helicopter neither spoke nor looked at each other. They sat silently, some trembling, some weeping softly, all faces reflecting the shock of what had taken place. As soldiers they realized it was their duty to stop the mob, but these enemies, consisting of women and children, were their own people, possibly their own relatives. It had been like shooting fish in a barrel. The mob had continued down the road, discarding the safety that lay a few feet away in the surrounding forest. It was ironic that their seeming total disregard of life was motivated by a deeper drive to save themselves from the radiation. Or was it?

Before the helicopter landed at Rimutaka the mob had reached the Kaimai shelter. And although many had been killed the mob was now larger than before. For as they moved closer to the shelter others had joined them. The families and people who had come to protect the shelter offered but a mild obstacle; the mob quickly overran them. Nor could the barbed wire fence or the soldiers stop them. It was no battle in the sense of firing and being fired upon. They simply continued to come foot by foot, body upon body, until finally they reached the wall of the shelter. And the first of those to reach the shelter never entered it. The tremendous force of thousands behind them crushed their bodies like overripe fruit against the plastic wall. Behind the blood-splattered wall the terrified children screamed and cried as the entrance gave way and the mob poured in.

And so it happened on that day that all the shelters fell but

one, the Rimutaka shelter where the Prime Minister waited.

It was just before dawn when he left the shelter. He had been through the horror of that night and now inside him there was an empty numbness, as if all the blood had been drained from his body. As each shelter had fallen a part of him had died. Wasted, all wasted, he thought, as he trudged by the smoldering campfires, his head hung low. He was tired, tired of thinking, tired of planning. How could one plan logically against illogical people? The only thing certain was that the mob would be coming. They were determined to destroy every shelter, determined to kill off any chance of man surviving. He shook his head in frustration and cursed out loud. A world without people. He could not remember hating one person in his entire life but now he hated and damned every cowardly soul in the mob. But even in his despair he was a captive of his own conscience and then, as if reprimanding himself, he mumbled, "Mustn't think like that. I'm just tired. It's the reason that drives them that I should hate."

When he reached the camp everyone was asleep. The fire had burned down, leaving only a faint glow beneath the ashes. He found some scraps of wood and placed them on the ashes and blew on the glow until a small flame came alive. Then he walked over and looked in on his family, sleeping beneath a sheet of canvas that had been erected to protect them from the wind. His daughter coughed and then rolled over on her side, cuddling against her mother. Surely she would catch cold sleeping here on the damp earth. He reached over and tucked the covers around her. The young and innocent, they know nothing of war and hate and radiation, yet they must share the fate of the destroyers, the killers.

"It's so unfair," he whispered.

His heart ached when he thought of the time wasted in planning during the last months, time that could have been spent with them. And now there was so little time left and even that he couldn't give them. He reached over and gently

touched each one, his face reflecting his affection, crouching there for a moment, devouring them with his eyes. Then, exhausted, he slipped off his shoes and curled beside them. *Mustn't give up, there is still today.* He closed his bloodshot eyes. *The plan will work—it must, it must.*

From inside a deep sleep he heard a soft voice calling, "Richard—Richard," and reluctantly his weary mind edged back toward consciousness. "Sorry to wake you, dear," said Cynthia, smiling down at him, "but O'Rourk said you asked him to wake you."

He sat up and shook his head. His watch had stopped. "What time is it?"

"Almost eight." She leaned over and gently rubbed the back of his neck. "O'Rourk said he would be back in a few minutes. Is everything going all right?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "We're the last shelter left. The mobs overran the others."

For an instant he felt her hand tighten on his neck. She looked as though she were going to say something, but instead she stood up and walked over to the fire, and after a moment said, "Would you like coffee?"

He nodded, then put his shoes on and joined her.

"I'm afraid we have only canned milk," she said. "Will that be all right?"

"Yes. Where are the children?"

"They went with Elizabeth to the shelter to get water."

"I could have had someone do that for you."

"Oh, no, the children enjoy helping."

He stretched and looked around him. The morning was quiet and still and a little warmer than usual for that time of year. Children ran between the trees playing, as if on a picnic, while their families chatted around the early campfires. From somewhere came the sound of singing. From another direction he heard someone laughing heartily. How absolutely amazing people are, he thought. He was right in not

telling about the other shelters. There was time to tell them later. Yes, let them enjoy as much of this last day as they could.

Cynthia handed him the cup of coffee. "We have some bread and cheese if you like."

"No, just coffee is fine."

Both sat down on a log by the fire. "Will it be long now, Richard?" she asked in a toneless voice.

He sighed and shook his head. "No, not long now, I suppose." He gazed at her as if studying her reaction.

"No, I'm not frightened, Richard," she said simply. She leaned against him. "I'm only sorry for the children; they're so young and they had their whole lives ahead of them." She paused. "When will the mob be coming?"

"They're already on their way. We're thirty miles from Wellington, so I suppose they won't arrive until nightfall."

"What's wrong with them, Richard? Why are they destroying everything?"

"I can't tell you why—I don't know. Perhaps they're insane with fear and the shelter seems their only hope of surviving." He shook his head. "I just don't know."

"But don't they realize that. . . ?"

"No, they're no longer rational. It's mass hysteria." He gulped down most of the coffee and threw the remaining liquid on the fire. It hissed and sent a thin stream of smoke up into the still air. "Confound it all, if only the bloody radiation had come sooner," he said angrily. "A bloody twenty-four hours sooner."

"Can't the soldiers stop them?"

"They haven't been able to, with the other shelters, so I imagine we won't be able to. No, there aren't enough soldiers to stop them."

She reached into her coat pocket and felt the reassuring small box of pills. "You mustn't worry about the children or me," she said softly. "I'll be able to take care of everything."

His own tone softened as he took her face in his hands. "I'm afraid it won't be that easy, dear. I have a plan, but if we are to pull it off I'll need you and the children. It won't be easy."

"But how will we be able to help?"

Before he could answer, O'Rourk and a group of men carrying axes and saws walked into the camp.

"We're ready, Mr. Prime Minister," said O'Rourk.

Parker kissed her lightly on the lips. "I'll explain everything later. I have to go now." He stood up to leave but she held tightly to his hand, anxiety on her face. "I won't be long," he said softly. "I'll explain everything when I return."

Suddenly she became aware of the group of men watching her. She immediately released his hand and stood up. "Certainly, why certainly," she said, forcing a smile. "See you when you get back."

If it weren't so sad he would have laughed at her cover-up. She watched them until they disappeared into the woods, then she sat down by the fire. The sky darkened overhead and after a few minutes a light rain started to fall. She seemed unaware of it, absorbed as she was in her own thoughts.

The rain had stopped and a cold wind blew across and down the mountain slopes from the south. Clouds passed overhead and the sky became clear, exposing a brilliant red sunset. Sinking sunrays slanting onto and through the trees flashed and glittered on the wetness. The air, echoing only the moaning sound of wind, smelled of pine and the smoldering fires as the protectors of the shelter stood in place, quietly waiting. The shadows deepened and then darkness fell. Still there was no movement or sound except for an occasional cry from an infant. Then finally, from a mile away, just over the crest in the road, came the frightening rumble of the mob's approach.

Although leg weary from the long day's march, the crowd

moved hurriedly up the last hill that stood between it and the shelter. Except for the children, every face wore an expression of fixed determination. Each was a part of the mob, yet each was indifferent to the other, seemingly concerned only with their own safety and the safety of their families. They were like a machine programmed to live at all costs. As long as they had the power to act, they must make every effort to maintain life, without logic or reason. They could no longer be classified as civilized, for only intellect and control of intellect separates men from beasts.

A group of young men ran ahead and were the first to top the hill. Suddenly, as if coming against an invisible wall, they stopped. Their hands shot up in front of their faces as a blinding light struck them, a light so intense that they were unable to look in its direction. They stood motionless for a moment, their disordered minds not able to comprehend the source of the light or to understand why no bullets came their way. As they slowly inched forward the most direct light passed overhead. By painful effort then they could look ahead through squinted eyelids and see, bathed in the mist of brightness, a towering crucifix at least fifty feet high, bold black against the light and casting a shadow halfway up the hill. So unreal, so unexpected was the sight that in their troubled minds they thought it was a vision, a mirage. Slowly, very slowly, they moved toward it, their hands still shielding their eyes. As they drew closer they could see at the foot of the crucifix rows of women standing side by side across the entire width of the road. In front of the women stood lines of children. And in front of the children, lying on the road wrapped in blankets, were infants. At the head of this army, standing erect to face those on the hill, were the Prime Minister and his family.

Gardiner and the General stood looking out from inside the shelter.

"Good God, he's done it," Gardiner said. "He's stopped them."

"Don't be too sure," said the General in a flat voice. "When they get closer they'll see the spotlights."

"It doesn't matter. He's stopped them. He's broken their panic. And if there's anyone who can talk to them now, it's he."

The General turned to one of his lieutenants. "Have the men stand ready."

Gardiner took hold of the General's arm. "Are you insane? You mustn't do anything now."

The General nodded to the lieutenant and the officer left the shelter. The General looked at Gardiner and then back at the mob. "Don't worry, I won't do anything unless they try to break through."

Parker was surprised by his own calmness in facing the most important task in his life. All the years of civilization had led up to this single climax. It was here on this small island, at this remote spot, that the fate of man would be decided, if only for the moment.

Until now everything had gone as planned. But how would they react when they saw the lights? Would they feel they had been tricked? His eyes were fixed on their bewildered faces as they came still closer: he studied them, knowing he must wait for the right moment before he spoke. When they were within twenty-five feet, they stopped and their eyes shifted from the crucifix to the Prime Minister and then behind him at the rows of women and children, the lights and finally the shelter. Their faces twitched as if in their tormented minds the purpose of their coming was rekindled.

Now! Now thought Parker. He raised his arms, took a step forward and spoke into a microphone that carried his voice far back into the crowd.

"God help us not to be afraid," he said in a grave but calm voice. "God protect this shelter, that those inside may carry on for all of us." He paused. "As your Prime Minister I ask you to let the last of our people live. They're mostly chil-

dren. I have never begged but I would beg on my knees for you to do so. The other shelters have been destroyed and nothing has been gained. This last shelter is our last hope. Let it stand. Leave, and my family and I will leave with you."

He looked out at them but there was no response. He knew that he must get them to respond or all would be lost.

"Will you allow my family and me to leave with you?"

Silence.

"Are you so frightened that you cannot answer your Prime Minister?"

From back in the mob someone yelled, "The shelter, the shelter!" There was a rumble of voices and they started forward, only to be stopped suddenly by an angry shout from the Prime Minister.

"Stop! What have you become?" he cried. "What insanity drives you? There is no safety here for you. You can only kill and destroy. Is that your purpose? Well then, if you must kill, start with me." He reached back for his daughter, frightened and crying, and held her in his arms. "Come ahead, kill us." He pointed behind him. "And kill the infants and children who, unlike you, are not afraid to die. Look at them!" he yelled. "You will have to trample them to reach the shelter, and even when you enter the shelter you will have to continue killing. You will have to kill each other, for there isn't enough space to hold any more." His voice turned cold and heavy with disgust. "Come ahead, and . . . may . . . God . . . damn your cowardly souls!"

For a moment his words seemed to hang on the still night air and then there was silence. A few minutes passed without anyone making the slightest movement, as if all were frozen to the spot. Parker could sense that they were struggling within themselves. He placed his daughter down and slowly walked up to the mob. A dark-skinned Maori girl stood half hidden between her parents. He lifted the child in his arms and walked back to the microphone.

"Will you let this child take my place?"

Silence.

"Answer me! Will you let this child take my place in the shelter?"

A moment passed and then the child's mother shouted, "Yes, yes!"

Others joined her, and then others, until everyone was chanting, "Yes, yes!" They kept repeating it over and over, as if by hearing their own voices they were reassuring themselves that the panic that had held them for so long was passing. From behind Parker came the sound of cheers that joined the chanting. Mothers darted forward and snatched their infants from the ground. Within minutes the two crowds were merging together like soldiers on a battlefield when an armistice has been called.

Cynthia threw her arms around Parker and burst into tears. "Oh, Richard, you've done it."

He held her close. "It's over," he whispered. "Everything is going to be all right now."

"But you. . . ."

"It was the only way," he said. "I've always wanted to be with you and the children. . . ."

She suddenly kissed him on the lips.

He smiled at her. "There are about twenty-five thousand people watching us," he whispered.

"I don't care," she smiled. "I love you."

He laughed. "And I love you, but there's a lot I have to do now. Take the children to the camp. I'll be there later."

Just then Gardiner came breaking through the crowd. He hurried to the microphone that had fallen to the ground. Lifting it, he spoke.

"Citizens, listen to me!" he shouted. "Listen!"

By degrees the noise subsided.

"Our Prime Minister has chosen a child to take his place. I say there is room for another child, the Prime Minister's son. It is up to you. What do you say?"

The crowd answered with a deafening roar of approval.

Parker stood there stunned. He hadn't expected that—not

his son, it was too much to ask. He looked around for Cynthia, but she had already disappeared into the crowd. He wished he could see her face at that moment. Slowly he walked to the microphone and looked out at the people who stood in the beam of the spotlights. Just a short time ago their faces had been twisted with madness, but now they smiled and cheered and were happy that they were given the chance to give their Prime Minister a most precious gift, the life of his son. This made them human; even more, for they had unselfishly put another life above their own.

In a voice full of feeling Parker thanked them and told them that he would leave with them in the morning. Then he turned quickly, overcome with emotion, and, taking Gardiner's arm, made his way through the crowd back toward the shelter.

He had fully composed himself when he entered the shelter. O'Rourk told him that the radiation level remained the same there at Rimutaki, but at Three King Island, just off the northern coast, it had risen sharply to over two hundred rads, about half the lethal dose for humans. Also, the wind had shifted and was now coming from the north, so they could expect the heavy radiation no later than sometime the following day.

A meeting was called with the men appointed to govern the shelter. At the meeting the Prime Minister's recommendation that Gardiner take his place as leader was unanimously agreed upon. For the next few hours they went over the plans they had made for the shelter and for the future of those who survived. Then Parker further explained his long-range plans. He spoke uninterruptedly, the men listening attentively, knowing it would be the last time they would have the benefit of his knowledge and foresight. When he finished speaking a gloomy silence fell over the room. He smiled gently as he looked at the sober faces of the men.

"I must say, you gentlemen seem quite sad about my leaving you. Please don't be upset for my sake. I'm not at all. I know the future of the shelter is in very capable hands." He

pushed his chair back and stood up. "I shan't say goodby now since I hope to see you all in the morning." He looked at Gardiner. "I should like to address the shelter before I leave tomorrow. Say around eight o'clock?"

"Certainly," replied Gardiner.

The men followed their Prime Minister into the hall where O'Rourk stood waiting.

"Your son is here, sir, waiting in your quarters."

Parker hurried down the hall. The boy didn't hear him enter. He was sitting on the bed facing the wall. On the small table beside the bed were a glass of milk and a piece of cake that hadn't been touched. Parker softly closed the door.

"Look here, son, if you're not going to eat that cake, I will."

The boy sprang up from the bed and then slowly, as if to show the restraint of a more mature person, sat down. "Will I have to stay here, Dad?" he said in a soft voice, trying to conceal the constriction in his throat.

Parker crossed the room to sit beside him. "Now isn't that an odd thing to ask? Why, you'll be safe here, son."

The boy's lower lip was quivering. "But I'd rather be with you and Mom."

"I'm afraid you can't," Parker said, his heart filled with love. "But knowing you're safe will make Mom and me happy. Try to understand."

The boy looked down at his small hands. His father, seeing them tremble, took them into his own, his face showing the strain of the moment. "It won't be bad, son. There are plenty of other boys and. . . ."

The boy, overcome with grief, buried his head in his father's shoulder and broke into heaving sobs.

"There, there, it's all right. Go ahead and cry—it's all right."

Parker held the boy in his arms, speaking softly and affectionately until he became calm. Then, as best he could, he explained everything, after which both sat quietly for a long time. Finally the boy went limp in his arms and he knew he

was asleep. He undressed him and covered him and quietly left the room. After being assured that O'Rourk would look in on Richard, Parker returned to the camp. That night, for the first time in a long while, sleep came easily.

At daylight, he found Cynthia and Cathy cuddled beside him under the blankets. He lay there motionless for a moment, inhaling the cold morning air and looking up at the early light seeping through the top of the pine trees. By the sway of the tree tops he could see that the wind came from the north, and he wondered about the radiation. It gave him a queasy feeling knowing that with each breath, the poison could be entering and destroying the tissues and membranes in his body, but he was happy enough that things had turned out as they did. At least all wasn't in vain. Some would survive. He arched his neck and looked around and saw the thin gray smoke of the morning campfires. Elizabeth was already dressing her children. He lifted his arm from beneath the warm covers and with his fingertips felt the light frost that lay on the canvas over the blankets. Then he rolled toward Cynthia and kissed her. Her eyes opened and she looked at him for a moment and then smiled drowsily. "It's time to get up," he whispered.

Just before eight they arrived at the shelter. The General stood at the entrance, nervously looking at the crowd that had already gathered there. The barbed wire fence had been taken down and they stood within a few feet of the shelter. Parker looked at them and then at the General.

"It's all right, General," he said reassuringly. "You have nothing to worry about with these people now."

"I've made arrangements to transport some of them back by vehicle but they refuse. They're waiting for you."

Parker had started to say something when Cynthia tugged at his arm. "It's Richard," she said excitedly, pointing up at the plastic wall. From inside, Bill Douglas and young Richard stood looking out at them. Parker could sense by Douglas' expression that something was wrong. The radiation. It must be here already. He waved back to them and

then turned to the General, who anticipated his question.

"It's here, all right. And plenty heavy." He paused, looked at Cynthia and Elizabeth and then back at Parker. "It will be all right for you to go in, sir, but . . ." he seemed a little embarrassed, ". . . but Mr. Gardiner said it would be safer if no one else entered."

Parker nodded. "Quite right." Gardiner had acted wisely. Being now in command his first consideration had to be the safety of the shelter. This first difficult decision only solidified his confidence in the man. He took Cynthia's hand in his. "I'm afraid you won't be able to go into the shelter. It's the radiation. Gardiner feels it would be safer if only I entered."

Her disappointment showed, but she turned slowly and looked up at their son. "Tell him we love him," she said, great tears welling in her eyes. "Tell him not to worry."

He squeezed her hand, then quickly entered the shelter. Gardiner and O'Rourk stood inside the narrow clearance where a sheet of thin plastic was spread on the floor with a pail of water in the center of it. O'Rourk was holding a complete change of clothing for him; he quickly disrobed, sponged himself down and put it on.

"I'm sorry about Mrs. Parker," Gardiner said. "I know how hard it must be on her."

"It's hard on everyone. She understands."

O'Rourk carefully folded the plastic sheet with the contaminated clothes inside and placed them by the door.

"Is everything in order?" asked Parker as they climbed the ladder to the upper level.

"Yes," replied Gardiner, "they're all waiting for you. I've informed them that you would speak to them before you left."

On the upper level the grim-faced occupants stood sadly looking at their Prime Minister, the expression on their faces close to reverence. Some forced smiles, others nodded affectionately as he walked by them. One woman reached out and touched him and then burst into tears. Slightly embarrassed

by the display of emotion, he quickly made his way to the radio room.

"They're quite sad about your leaving," said Gardiner. "You'll be missed."

Parker looked at him. "No one wants to die, Geoffrey. But with things as they are, I honestly feel fortunate that I'll be able to be with my family." He smiled and put his hand on Gardiner's shoulder. "And thanks to you, my son will be alive."

A moment later his voice sounded over the intercom throughout the shelter. "This is your Prime Minister speaking. As you all know I shall be leaving the shelter this morning. I am sorry that time does not allow me to see you all again. But I want to bid you farewell for myself, your families, and for all the people of New Zealand. For the next two years your world will be limited to this shelter. It will not be easy. Yours will be a world without sun or stars or seasons. Nor will you feel the rain or smell the sea. For two long years all the beauty of nature will be denied you. Now you may not realize how much you will miss these things, but as time passes you will feel a great sense of loss. For man's rightful place is with nature." He paused. "And yet, although it won't be easy, you are the fortunate ones. Two years is but a small price to pay for the colossal tragedy inflicted by our species, not only upon ourselves but upon all the animals and living things in our world. Ask yourselves: How did it happen? What insanity drove us to such a calamity? It is fear, hate, greed and all the human frailties of man that have brought about this situation. Remember them! Remember this ugly, contaminated world outside so you can better appreciate the beauty of the new world you will build. Remember the price of death that all those outside the shelter have paid, and, more tragically, the countless children who will never be born. Remember! Let all these things be branded in your mind so you will never forget." He paused, as his voice echoed through the shelter. "This new world I speak of is within your power to build. You will

learn to overcome your weaknesses. You must learn! There is no other way—*you must learn!* Listen to your leaders, but do not follow blindly. Give them your support but not for safekeeping. Remember your leaders are only your leaders because you will it so. Stay abreast and keep in sight the goals you set, and you need never worry about losing your freedom. And if, when you leave the shelter, you find other people from other countries, unite with them. You must not go separate from one another again. Have one country, the world. Have one nationality; one race, the human race. It can be so. Remember that! Believe it! There are those who would say that it is impossible to build such a world and they would have been correct in the world of yesterday, but I am not speaking of yesterday, but of tomorrow. I realize an enormous task has been placed upon you, but as man can destroy so can he build. Build a new world!" He paused, his tone turning soft and a little sad. "And now I must leave you. In a few days you will inherit the earth. Cherish it. Goodbye. God bless you and keep you safe."

Cheers rang through the shelter as Parker left the room and entered the hall. He passed among the people waving, shaking hands, touching and being touched until finally he came to Douglas and his son. The boy stood straight and proud, only his eyes betraying the grief that churned inside him. He was conscious of eyes upon him and knew that everyone was watching. He was the Prime Minister's son. He must act so. He must hold back the welling tears.

His father crouched down and looked into his face. "Richard, you mustn't worry about us," he said tenderly. "Always remember that your mother and I love you very much, and that we'll be waiting for you in heaven." He smiled a little sadly. "After all, we're quite lucky, you know: I hear heaven is rather nice." He leaned over and kissed him, then stood up and turned to Douglas. "Look after him for me, Bill."

Douglas nodded, "Aye, as if he were my own."

Parker shook his hand. "I'll see that everything is right with Elizabeth and the children."

He waved to the people, shook hands with Gardiner, looked once more at Richard, then turned and left the shelter.

Outside the crowd separated, making a path for the Prime Minister and his family. Then, like a procession, they fell in behind him as he started on the long journey back to Wellington. When they reached the top of the first hill Parker stopped and looked back. The morning was clear, the sun's golden rays reflecting on the plastic wall of the shelter. Thin lines of smoke from the dying fires rose past the tree tops, then swelled and vanished in the morning wind.

He lifted his daughter in his arms, looked up at the cloudless blue sky, sighed and turned to Cynthia, who was still waving at the shelter. He gave one final wave, then took her hand in his. "It's a beautiful day," he said almost cheerfully. "Let's go home."

And so had come that time to die for all living creatures.

Across the ocean the white African shore sparkled in bright sun. The vast sea threw itself upon the beach in waves that turned from dark to light blue to white, endlessly rushing back amid the monotonous roar of the next line of assaulting breakers. A warm ocean wind ruffled the trees. The day seemed like any other day.

But this wind carried death, an inescapable and deadly dust that would cover the planet.

The sea bird took flight from beneath a tree, its wings climbing high into the wind, and then, as if shot, fell into the sea.

On the edge of the jungle the large tree snake's white underbelly faced up to the sun.

The water buffalo stood motionless by the water hole being sick, his body shaking in spasms, his bowels giving way, his blood-muffled cry lasting until his hind quarters

came down and he lay on his side in his own vomit, quietly waiting.

The last crocodile slowly slid into the rapids, ending his species' hundreds of millions of years.

Jackals and hyenas, surrounded by death, were themselves dying.

The elephants moved slowly, single file, into the thickness of the jungle to their final resting ground, the tremor of their giant steps growing fainter and fainter.

The sea scavengers, having feasted, had become in turn a poisoned meal for others.

And the sun rose and flowers blossomed, but there were no bees. When night set in, no crickets sounded in the grass.

But from somewhere, cutting the still night, came the final throaty, glorious roar of the lion—the very last animal sound.

All was then still.

The foul smell of death and rot hung over all the land. Wind and sea and rivers made the only sound, the only movement.

IX

Late in August Marian became ill with a high fever. Paul Root, sitting on the bed to place a damp cloth on her forehead, saw her eyes open. She smiled tiredly up at him.

"How do you feel?" he said softly.

"Hot."

"The fever will break soon."

She closed her eyes and he stood up to leave.

"Please don't go. Talk with me."

He sat down again and after a moment asked, "You're not from Washington, are you? I mean, one rarely meets a native Washingtonian."

She smiled. "No, I've lived here for only six years. I was born in Utah. Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia, originally. Whatever brought you all the way from Utah?"

"I wanted to see the East Coast. So, when I finished school I applied for a job with the government." She squirmed feverishly beneath the covers.

"It would be better if you tried to sleep," he said.

"No, I'd like to talk now. It's been so long. . . . You know, being here gives a person plenty of time to think about life. yours couldn't have been shallow, but mine was."

"What makes you think mine was so different?"

"For one, your profession. Astronomy. To study and try explaining the stars and universe seems to me very fulfilling."

"Cerebral, and at times frustrating."

"Tell me; if you had all the money you needed, would you still stay at your work?"

"Certainly. But there are many men motivated by more than making money."

"By vanity, winning respect of their fellows, perhaps, but comparatively few by curiosity. I'm merely saying that you belonged to that fortunate group who were doing what you wanted to do for the most meaningful of reasons, a search for knowledge."

"You make it sound quite noble."

"It is. But more important, you had love. I can tell. Your family must have loved you very much. That makes living so much easier, doesn't it?"

He nodded.

"You know," she continued in a whisper, "I don't even feel sad about my baby any more. She never knew."

"Death isn't so tragic, especially instant death. The real fear lies in the anticipation of it." He looked down at the floor. "The tragedy is for us who survive, helpless. Except for memories nothing is left."

Her hand came from beneath the covers and touched his. "I guess it's harder if you have more to lose."

He looked down at her small face, the tired eyes, the skin drawn and colorless. Still, there was a sad sweetness about it. It would be so natural to kiss her now, he thought, surprised at his impulse. She was different from the other women; there was no pretense about her. Long ago he had learned that people go through entire lives presenting an image, honestly believing they are concealing their true characters behind that image, but rarely being fooled by the disguises of others. It was almost comical; practically no one fools anyone.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He turned the cloth on her forehead. "Nothing in particular."

"Lately I've been wondering how it was for my mom and

dad at the end. We had a two-hundred-acre farm just outside Salt Lake City."

They were among the unfortunate ones, thought Paul, dying slowly of radiation rather than the blast.

"It was nice growing up on a farm, surrounded by animals," she said, her face taking on a tranquil look. "You sort of feel in place, like you're part of it all. I can remember the bright mornings when everything came to life. By afternoon things would slow down, and at night we would just sit on the porch and it would be dead silent except for the sound of crickets and some coyote howling far off in the dark. Dad used to say that God gave order to nature and we should keep order in our lives if we wanted to be happy."

"I agree with him. Somebody once said that man's desire for order is so overpowering that he'll even sacrifice freedom for it. But in the society we lived in it was sometimes necessary to have disorder."

"Why?"

"Well, men in power usually act only when they're forced to. This sometimes makes disorder necessary to bring about change, an action to be condemned or justified depending on the ultimate outcome. I'd rather not talk about that; it reminds me of politics and governments, and how horribly they and we failed." He forced a smile. "Tell me about you."

"I've told you—a shallow existence."

"And your marriage?"

"A tragedy from the start." She lay silent for a few minutes, staring at the underside of the bunk overhead, a look of pain creeping into her face. Then wearily, as though she had thought about it a thousand times, she said, "You keep thinking things will change but they rarely do. I know now that we should have separated, but that took courage. It's funny how people think it's the opposite." She sighed. "I was married a year when I became pregnant. A few months later when I went for my check-up I discovered I had a venereal disease. My husband wouldn't admit he gave it to me. He accused me of running with other men. The doctor

kept reassuring me that the baby would be all right, but I ended up having a miscarriage at six months. You would think by then I would have had enough courage to leave him." She lay very still. "We continued to live together like strangers, months dragging into years. I started drinking. Only a little at first to get through the day, I used to tell myself. It wasn't long before I was drunk more than I was sober. I seldom saw Ralph, but it didn't matter. I was content to live in that bottle. He had political aspirations. I imagine that's why he didn't seek a divorce—bad image and all that. Besides, we were each alone, we only lived together in the house. When he started to pity me I couldn't stand it. Why, when people start to become successful, do their consciences bother them?

"He somehow managed to talk me into going to one of those places that dry you out. A psychiatrist there told me I was trying to commit suicide with alcohol, the same as someone would with a gun. You tell yourself that he doesn't know what he's talking about, but deep down you're frightened because you know it's true. As soon as I came out I started drinking again. No one can help you if you don't want to help yourself; it's just that simple. On rare occasions, usually after he had been drinking, Ralph would come into my bed. I would feel him undress me and then the weight of his body moving up and down on me. It would all be done in silence, without one word. No love, no tenderness. I was no better; I stayed and allowed it to happen. And when he was finished and back in his room, I would lie there in the dark, empty of any feeling. I woke one morning to find I was pregnant again.

"There's something very special about knowing you have a living thing inside you, knowing you're responsible. I needed that baby. Oh God, how I needed that baby. Even Ralph seemed happy about it. Maybe because I had stopped drinking, and there was some understanding between us. Not love, but he was kind to me and the baby. When the occasion called for it I would go to a political dinner or cocktail

party with him. That's where I met Mrs. Spina."

She began to laugh softly and then to sob. "It's funny, you know. Mrs. Spina invited me to come with her club to see the Observatory. I can remember her saying I'd find it exciting." She looked at Paul. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I've never told anyone before. Maybe it's the fever, maybe I'll be sorry tomorrow."

"Sometimes we all have to tell somebody," he said, as simply as he could, leaning over and wiping a tear from beneath her eye with a careful finger. "I'm flattered you chose me."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment. Then she said, "We've all been crowded in this room, yet it's been unbearably lonely. It . . . it's not quite as lonely now."

He smiled and placed his hand over her small one, squeezing it gently. "I'll get you some water," he said, rising. "It'll help the fever."

The lights going on and off separated day from monotonous day. Weeks, then months passed, unchanging. Paul sat hours on end by the radio, hoping to hear some sound of life, but there was only the crackling static. He cursed the men who planned the shelter for not providing trans-Atlantic radio, for if only they could know for certain there were other people alive somewhere in the world it might have helped. At first there were only arguments, but as the months wore on it wasn't uncommon to see two women tearing at each other with fingernails and fists, Agnes watching with an arrogant expression as though she had known from the very start how it would be.

At the weekly meetings when Paul rebuked them for the fighting, Agnes would take the side of one of the women, thus slowly and cleverly alienating him from another of the group. Each week she made reasoning with them more difficult for him. When they began calling him "the preacher," he kept to himself, rarely speaking to anyone except Marian.

But Agnes' sarcastic remarks about whatever he did continued to make him feel belittled. There was no escaping her. When he awoke in the morning he would look around and there she would be, staring at him, awaiting her next opportunity. When he moved around the shelter, when he ate, or read, or just lay in his bunk, he could feel her watching him. It was as though she were playing some demented game, her sole purpose to torment him.

By December, she had succeeded in turning half the group against him. Except for the use of violence, Paul knew there was no defense against her. But he, by training more cerebral than physical, was determined to remain civilized, believing that in spite of all that was happening the women were intelligent and rational and would, when it really counted, show themselves as such. He, being thoroughly male, did not consider women as physical threats, not even Agnes. If he had known then what lay ahead, he would have struck her down without the slightest hesitation or remorse.

Christmas morning to Paul Root was just the beginning of another dreary day. There were too many memories connected with Christmas to think about it, memories that would only stir that screaming emptiness inside him. He reached for his trousers at the bottom of the bed and slid them on beneath the covers. Some of the women laughed at his modesty now, but he knew that it was important to maintain it. Often he had heard them making remarks about his maleness, knowing him within earshot, and he had seen their unmistakable looks, their desire to break the dismal monotony of the shelter. He wondered how long it would be before they became bolder. That was something he would worry about when the time came.

He swung his legs over the side of the bunk and, looking in the direction of the bathroom, discovered he was lucky; there were only two women in line outside the door. From habit his eyes quickly sought out Agnes.

"Merry Christmas, Bub," she called when their eyes met.

He nodded and reached beneath the bunk for his shoes,

cursing himself for playing her game of peek-a-boo. Tomorrow he wouldn't give her that satisfaction. He had said that yesterday, he thought as he walked toward the bathroom.

At first mornings had been the most embarrassing part of the day, and for his sake Mrs. Spina asked the women not to walk around in underclothes, half covered. For a while some effort was made. But now it was quite common to see some of them spend an entire day clad only in a slip or pants.

"Merry Christmas, Paul," said Mildred Austin, the woman in front of him in the line.

Of all the women in the shelter he found her the least intelligent. Yet she, better than anyone else, had adjusted to the environment in which they now lived. She was in her early thirties, with a beautifully proportioned body and a delicate face which, if she didn't speak, gave the impression of a stately, dignified woman. She was as refreshing as a child to speak to, always in the best of spirits, ready to laugh, and she could sit for hours on end singing or humming to herself, seemingly content and undisturbed by all that went on around her. Paul liked her.

She was wearing only a half slip and, when she turned, her firm breast barely quivered with the movement. "Did you hear, Paul? We're going to have a Christmas party," she said gleefully. "Right after dinner. You know that case of whiskey we found? Well, we're finally going to break a few bottles open." She chuckled. "It'll do us all good to get a little plastered."

Paul nodded and shuffled his feet impatiently, feeling the pain of his kidneys.

"Gosh, it's been a long time since I had a drink. Harry—you know, my husband—and me used to sit sometimes and drink a bottle of whiskey together. Boy, how he could drink, God bless him. People didn't really know him. They all thought that he was such a serious guy. I guess he had to act like that, being in politics and all, right?"

"Right."

"But with me he was just a big kid, always laughing and

joking. You know, he was fifteen years older than me but you'd never know it the way he would carry on. He was like a stallion." She started laughing, her breasts trembling like tight springs. Then she noticed Paul's eyes move down her body and quickly back to her face. "I'm sorry about that," she said, awkwardly crossing her arms over her chest.

"What?"

"You know—my not wearing a top. You see, my bra kinda wore out and. . . ."

"Oh, that's quite all right, Mildred. I don't mind."

"You don't?"

"No."

She uncrossed her arms and looked down at her breasts. "It's no good, you know."

"What?"

"Not having a bra."

"Oh."

"Yes. They get flabby if you don't support them."

"They look fine to me."

"You think so? You really think so?"

"They look just fine to me, Mildred."

The bathroom door opened and the woman in front of Mildred entered.

"Mildred, would you mind very much if I went in front of you?" he asked. "I'll let you ahead of me another time. All right?"

She smiled and stepped around him. "Sure, go ahead. I know it's harder on men in the morning."

Paul started toward the door, but Mildred placed a hand on his arm. "So you really don't think I'm looking flabby, huh? You know, you're a pretty nice guy." Her expression showed the thoughts she was entertaining.

"You're nice, too," he said quickly. "and when we get out of here I'm sure you're going to meet some nice Australian. You can count on me telling him what a lady you are."

Her expression changed to a troubled frown. "Do you really think there are other people alive?"

"Certainly."

"Agnes said we're probably the only ones left."

"I'm sure Agnes is wrong, Mildred. Remember the broadcaster said the radiation wouldn't reach the southern hemisphere for at least two months. That would give them plenty of time to prepare for it."

She stood thinking for a moment, then smiled broadly. "Sure, there must be other people alive." She looked understandingly into his face. "I still think you're a nice guy," she said, patting his arm in a friendly gesture.

He smiled and was about to say something but the bathroom door opened. Anyway, what more was there to say to Mildred?

Dinner was an hour earlier than usual that day since there had been no lunch, the woman in charge of cooking having decided to combine both meal rations into one. There had been a sweet smell of baking bread to fill the room while everyone waited, and now Paul noticed that for the first time in months all the women sitting at the table were fully dressed, their hair done as best they could manage, wearing makeup and chatting with each other in an atmosphere of politeness characteristic of people going out to dinner. He turned to Marian who sat at his right.

"Everyone has dressed for dinner," he said.

"It's Christmas."

He smiled. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

At the other end of the table sat Agnes and the women she had turned against him. Normally they would not meet his eyes, but now they smiled warmly at him. Even Agnes. Was it because she was satisfied that half the women accepted her as leader? Most likely it was a one-day armistice.

The women murmured their delight and smacked their lips like children as the food was placed on the table: roasted cornish hens stuffed with bread and sausage filling, one half for each person; spinach with mushrooms; a bowl each of sweet and white potatoes; tender white onions baked to a golden brown. For dessert they had gelatin and fresh-baked

sweet Polish bread called bobka that Mrs. Galeski had made.

When they finished the women sat back heavy-eyed, a look of satisfaction on their faces. The dishes were cleared away. Then Agnes nodded to her lackeys, Elaine Jones and Anne Stewart, who went into the storeroom and returned with four bottles of Canadian whiskey, placing them on the table in front of Agnes. She opened them and the two women moved down the table pouring each person approximately three ounces of whiskey. The remaining bottles were placed one on each side of the table.

"I'd like to make a toast," Agnes said, standing and holding up her glass, waiting for them all to rise. "To all of us that survived, and to the strong."

She jerked her head back and threw the whiskey down her throat.

"I have a surprise for you," she said a moment later, reaching into a box Stewart placed in front of her as they all resumed their seats. "Cigars." She threw a handful across the table and burst into laughter. "They're not cigarettes, girls, but it's the best we can do." She looked at Paul. "Have a cigar, Bub—I mean Paul," she added apologetically.

Paul put the cigar in his shirt pocket. Then he reached for the bottle of whiskey, half filled his glass, gulped that much down and refilled.

"That's a lot of whiskey," Marian remarked.

"It's Christmas," he replied, sitting back, a warm promising glow spreading in his stomach. His glance shifted to the women giggling at each other, their jaws moving like nibbling fish as they puffed away, and he wanted to laugh at the delicate way they fingered the large fat cigars. Only Agnes seemed in character as she poured the whiskey and joked, the cigar bobbing up and down between her yellow teeth. Then as he watched he noticed her eyes move down the table to Mary Richardson, who sat next to her mother.

Mary was just fifteen, of medium height, slender, with long blond hair and a milky skin. She seldom spoke unless

spoken to. At first Paul attributed this to her youth. But on the few occasions he had offered suggestions to her about courses of study or choices for leisure reading she evidenced a frightful awareness of all that was going on in the shelter. It was obviously her preference to remain silent. Except for being a bit nervous she had adjusted fairly well, occupying much of her time reading.

"What's the matter, Mary?" Agnes asked, smiling broadly, the cigar now in the corner of her mouth. "You ain't touched your drink yet."

"She's too young to drink," her mother replied.

"Mary? Would you like to drink?" Agnes ignored the mother.

The girl looked up. "I'd rather not."

"Go on, it'll make you feel good, honey."

"She doesn't drink," snapped her mother. "Come on, Mary," she said, getting up from the table.

Agnes shrugged, "Look, I'm only trying to be nice. I like the girl." She smiled at Mary. "If you ever want anything, just ask me, honey."

"Just leave us alone," said Mrs. Richardson as they left the table.

Agnes' manner toward the girl had seemed sincere but Paul found something peculiar about the expression on her face—something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Perhaps it was just the whiskey? But deep down he knew it was more than that.

Before long the bottles were empty and replaced by four more. Most of the women were now drunk, some for the first time in their lives. Their laughter became louder and louder, edging on hysteria. Mildred was dancing on the table to the clapping and shouting that urged her on; and when she got down the cultivated Mrs. Boyer surprised everyone by getting up there and, as if possessed, dancing with primitive movements in time to the clapping of the delighted women. Six months earlier these same women would have been shocked by such a display.

"Drink! Drink! Drink!" Paul shouted within the confines of his mind. Drink and dance till the room spins, until body and mind stagger and spin, until you vomit in your dizziness and no longer think. And when you wake tomorrow, time will have elapsed and yesterday will have been different, if only for a few hours.

Marian, unconsciously tapping her fingers in rhythm with the dancing, saw Paul enter the storeroom.

"They're really noisy, aren't they?" she said when she followed him in.

He turned with a forced smile. "They seem to be enjoying themselves," he mumbled.

"Are you?"

There was a little whiskey in the bottom of the glass he held. He drank it down and threw the glass on top of the boxes. "I guess I am. What about you?"

She looked at him intently for a long moment. Her expression, the planes of her face, her moist mouth, the yearning in those sad eyes, the forgotten smell of a woman's perfume all suddenly enveloped him. He took her in his arms, embraced her, kissed her on the lips. He felt her smooth skin beneath the silk blouse, feminine, warm, her body pressing against his. Then as suddenly as he embraced her he released her and stepped back, looking anxiously at the doorway, fearing that someone may have seen them.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," he said, after a moment. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?"

"Where will it lead us in this forsaken place?" He shook his head. "No, it's all wrong."

"Is it wrong that I love you?" she said, tears coming to her eyes. "I can't help it if we're trapped in here. I can't help how I feel about you. These last months would have been unbearable if it weren't for you. You must have known. Can you understand how. . . ?"

He took her face between his hands. "Don't! It's not that I don't want you, Marian. You matter more to me than I want

to tell you. But here in the shelter it's . . . it's impossible."

She looked up, her sad eyes reaching out to him pleadingly.

Was it the whiskey, the seven empty months that had gone by, or just the demanding need of one human for another? He drew her to him and kissed her hungrily. She responded with the same urgent passion.

"Tonight," he whispered.

"Oh, Paul," she cried softly.

"We have to wait until everyone's asleep."

Then they held each other in an exciting silence of anticipation. Finally Paul said, "We better get back now before someone misses us."

Just as they turned Rita staggered through the doorway, her eyes suspiciously shifting from one to the other. "Well! What are you two doing in here?" she stammered.

Her suspicion reassured Paul that she hadn't seen them, so without answering he and Marian brushed by her into the other room.

Elaine Jones and Mildred were dancing there together, drunk and staggering, holding onto each other like tired marathon dancers, Mildred stripped down to the half slip which clung to her perspiring body. As Paul watched, Mrs. Jones focused her eyes on the face lying on her shoulder and, with head swaying from side to side, puckered her lips and clumsily kissed Mildred, first on the cheek and then on her drooping mouth.

"That's it, Elaine, kiss her," shouted one of the women, the group at her table breaking into delirious laughter.

Mildred lifted her head in a stupor, eyelids open only a crack, lips curled into a lazy smile. Then as though the effort were too great, her head fell forward on Elaine Jones' shoulder and they continued shuffling around the floor.

Paul shook his head and looked with distaste at the women around the table; one had passed out and lay curled up on the bench, another was sprawled across the table. Even Mary Spina was drunk. She sat, her head bobbing, her

shoulders humped, quietly mumbling to Mrs. Sheldon who seemed in a state beyond comprehension. His glance shifted to Agnes at the head of the table. She was leaning back on the chair, feet propped up on the table, her eyes absorbing all that was going on around her, that coarse face of hers wearing such a look of pleasure and elation that he half expected her to burst into tears of joy.

He walked up to lift the whiskey bottle in front of her and hold it to the light. It was a quarter full. "I think the women have had enough to drink," he said, placing the bottle back on the table.

Agnes took the cigar stump from between her teeth and wiped a trickle of tobacco juice from the corner of her mouth. "Yeah, I guess they have," she chuckled, not looking at him. She turned to Anne Stewart who sat beside her. "How many bottles did they drink?"

"Eight," said Stewart.

Agnes put the cigar back in her mouth and grinned up at Paul. "The ladies did all right, huh?"

"You enjoy seeing them drunk, don't you?"

The grin widened to a smile. "Yeah, I sure do." Then looking at the women she started to laugh. "They don't look like such prima donnas now."

Paul had an urge to kick the chair from under her. Instead he went over to his bunk. Looking at his watch he saw it was ten past ten. He slipped off his shoes and lay back on the bed.

The stale smell of whiskey lingered in the shelter as he waited, listening in the dark to the snoring and heavy breathing. The bathroom door was partly open and in the shaft of light he saw it was twelve thirty-five. Marian might have fallen asleep. Perhaps that would be better, he thought. But he knew she wasn't sleeping. Excitement stirred when he saw a figure walking carefully toward the light. Marian. She entered the bathroom and a minute later came out and closed the door, leaving only the smallest crack of light.

Paul waited a few more minutes, then rose and walked to

the storeroom. In the pitch black room he caught the scent of her perfume. He stood perfectly still to whisper, "Marian?"

"Over here."

His arms outstretched, he inched his way in the direction of her voice. Then they found each other and he took her in his arms and kissed her. A soft groan passed through her mouth into his as his hands moved down her slim body. Then taking his hands she moved backward until she felt the blanket.

"Here," she whispered, pulling him down beside her. She wiggled out of her slip, the warm silk gliding past his bare chest like a feathering breeze.

"You're trembling," he said as he leaned over her. "Are you frightened?"

She didn't answer but her arms reached up and locked around his neck and she gently pulled him down upon her. He felt her smooth warm breasts depress beneath his weight and then the faint pounding of her heart against his chest.

"It's been so long," he sighed, his fingers tracing the exquisite curves of her body. Time stopped in a limbo of delicate caresses and exciting smells of passion, tender whispers and soft moans of pleasure. Finally he slid between her soft and yielding thighs, the surrounding dark becoming a cloud blocking out all the world, all thoughts of yesterdays as he sank into her warmth.

Paul lay in his bed, drifting in half sleep, reliving the night before. It was near noon but many of the women were just getting up. Their voices filtered slowly into his dreams and he lay with eyes closed listening to the chatter.

"Come on, hurry up in that bathroom."

"Whee! Do I have a hangover!"

"I'm starving."

"Did you see how that Mildred can dance? She can really dance."

"Hey, Eleanor, wake Mildred. Ask her if she wants to dance."

Laughter.

"Christ, we drank a lot of whiskey, didn't we?"

"You made a pig of yourself."

"I wasn't the only one."

"Did you fall asleep in that bathroom? Come on, there are other people waiting, you know."

"Go to hell!"

"Christ, those cigars leave you with a rotten taste."

"Dorothy, please take my place cooking today? I don't feel so good."

"Did anyone see my shoes?"

"Anyone for calisthenics?"

Laughter.

Paul slipped on his trousers and sat up.

Marian was sitting on the side of her bed brushing her dark hair. After a moment, becoming conscious of his staring, she smiled warmly back at him, her eyes soft with love. Paul struggled without success to conceal his feelings; last night was too fresh a memory. Then, tearing his eyes away from her, he walked over to the table, where Mary Spina handed him a glass of orange juice. He emptied it thirstily. "A refill? I'll skip tomorrow's ration."

She hesitantly poured him a second glass. As he lifted it to his lips he suddenly realized that for the first time in months upon arising he had not looked around for Agnes. He felt a fleeting triumph, then shook his head and mumbled to himself when he found she had not yet awakened.

"You know, Paul," Mary Spina said softly, so as not to be overheard, "last night was the only time in my life I ever overdrank. I . . . I can't understand what made me do it."

He patted her shoulder. "I've read that alcohol is the first thing natives ask for from civilized man. Helps overcome the boredom, perhaps. Anyway, Mary, we're all entitled to let go once in awhile."

He turned and walked over to the bookshelf. Whoever

had selected the books for the shelter had done a discriminating job. His glance passed over the titles and author's names: Tolstoi, Mark Twain, Thomas Mann, others of equal stature. Sadness edged into his face as he fingered through *Profiles of the Future* by Arthur Clarke. The incredible achievements that had been within man's reach, so close and now only a dream! He gave an involuntary sigh of despair. What colossal waste! But thinking of what could have been meant torturing himself. The world for the time being was the shelter. He took Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and went back to his bunk.

He had been lying there only a few minutes when Rita came and stood looking down at him. "I'd like to talk to you," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed, and slyly adding, "Doctor."

He looked over the top of his book. "What's on your mind, Rita?"

"You."

"What did you want to talk about?"

"Now don't be so irritable. Am I so repulsive that you don't want to talk with me? There was a time, Doctor, when I know you found me quite attractive."

"What's on your mind?" He sighed.

"I've told you. You."

"Stop acting like a silly ass."

She looked anxiously around, then moved closer, placing her hand on his and speaking in a whisper. "*I* want to meet you tonight."

Paul worriedly pulled his hand away, sat up and said sharply, "If you have anything to say just say it."

"Oh, come on now. I know about last night with Marian. Let's not play games."

"I don't know what you're talking about. And you don't either."

"Look, Doctor," she began patiently, "I'm not against what happened. It's only natural. Heaven knows I understand." She paused, her face softening into what she vainly

thought to be an appealing look. "Oh, Paul, can't you see. . . ."

"Listen, Rita," he interrupted, "I think you're all mixed up. And even if something happened between someone else and me, that's none of your concern." He lay back on the bed. "Now I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me alone."

She stared coldly at him. "What's wrong with me? What kind of man are you? If you're a man at all!"

He started deliberately to read.

"You better listen to me," she said, her voice cracking with anger. "I can make trouble."

He put the book down and stared at her, the vein in his temple swelling to a thick blue line. "Don't threaten me," he said in a low icy voice.

"Look, Paul, all I want. . . ."

"I know what you want," he snapped.

"Well?" she persisted.

He lay back on the bed. "Go do whatever you like."

She jumped up. "Paul, don't make me tell."

Silence.

"God damn you," she swore, "you'll be sorry," and added a final sarcastic, "Doctor."

Ten minutes later Agnes called a meeting.

The chatter of the women gathering around the table subsided to murmurs, then all was quiet except for the monotonous hum of the generators. Paul knew they were waiting for him, and why. His anger mounted in giant waves as he lay listening. How ridiculous life had become, he thought. Yet the ridiculous was real in this madhouse where he was cast in a role he despised. There was no escape.

Agnes' voice cut the heavy silence. "Mr. Root, we're waiting for you."

Marian. How terrible for Marian, he thought, to have her love made to seem ugly and cheap when it was real and wonderful and beautiful. As the gift that surmounts all miseries should be.

"Mr. Root, we're waiting."

Slowly he rose and crossed the room.

"Take a seat, Mr. Root." Agnes pointed to his chair at the opposite end of the table.

"I'll stand," he said sharply.

It was impossible for her to conceal her pleasure. "Whatever you like." She paused and looked at the women. "Now," she said as though savoring the moment, "the reason I called this meeting is, we seem to have a problem. Rita here tells me she caught Paul and Marian fucking last night and. . . ."

Paul's anger snapped. "Shut up, damn you. I won't take that kind of talk."

"Oh, excuse me," exclaimed Agnes, not in the least disturbed by his outburst. "How can I say it? Sexual intercourse?"

In that split second where thoughts precede action, he actually saw himself leaping over the table and smashing his fist into Agnes' grinning face until the bones crumbled in a bloody pulp. "You've gone too far this time," he said in a shaky voice, trembling with the struggle to control his galloping rage.

Her face hardened. "I'm only doing what we're supposed to do—talk out our grievances. It's O.K. when it's somebody else, but different when it's you. What makes you think you're the big man around here?"

"This is a personal matter, no one else's business."

"Everything that happens in here is everybody's business. These other women are human too."

Mrs. Sheldon stood up. "It *is* a personal matter. And to have a meeting over something like this is ridiculous."

"Nobody asked for your opinion," Agnes snapped.

"But I have a right to express it."

"Shut up and sit down."

"Shut up yourself! You . . . you. . . ."

"Be careful," warned Agnes.

"You don't scare me like you do the others. You're sick—do you know that? Mentally sick."

With surprising speed Agnes snatched the sugar bowl and flung it at Mrs. Sheldon, striking her on the chest. Before anyone could move she grabbed and threw it back, aiming for and hitting the side of Agnes' head. The bowl shattered on the cement floor.

"Why, you little bitch," Agnes hissed, starting around the table.

Paul quickly stepped in front of Mrs. Sheldon. "All right, get hold of yourself," he said when Agnes came within a few feet. "What do you expect her to do? Take your abuse?"

He secretly hoped Agnes would not listen, wanting her to challenge him, to bring on the inevitable showdown.

Again it wasn't fear that prompted Agnes' restraint. She had handled men bigger and stronger than Paul. Eggheads were especially easy, she told herself, being gentlemen and brainy and all that character shit, never knowing what they're up against physically until too late. Like that drunken seaman in Baltimore a few years ago. She could still remember the shocked look on his face and the horrible scream when she sank her foot into his balls, and how, when he lay whimpering on the floor weak as a baby, she jerked his head back and slammed her thumb in until the eyeball hung out of its socket like a piece of jelly on a string, part of it beneath her thumbnail. No, Dr. Paul Root would be no problem at all. But now she had him right where she wanted him.

Agnes rubbed the side of her head. "Yeah, fair's fair. I threw the bowl at her first." She looked at Sheldon and smiled. Then she turned and went back to her seat.

Paul, not fooled by her uncharacteristic temperance, and annoyed by his own feeling of violence, turned to the women. "What are we becoming? We're supposed to be intelligent human beings, not animals."

"O.K., O.K.," Agnes said, banging on the table. "Let's get back to the purpose of this meeting."

"There's no need for that." Paul looked into Marian's face. "What happened last night wasn't wrong, not in the

world we humans were supposed to live in." His face hardened as he looked away. "But we don't live in that world any longer. We live here in this shelter where there is no privacy." He paused. "So until we leave it what occurred last night will not occur again."

"Do we have your word on that?" asked Agnes.

"Yes, damn it."

"What if it happens again?"

"I said it won't."

"If it does, will you be willing to entertain any of the other women?"

A stifling silence hung over the table as Paul stared at her, unbelieving. Then he sighed, shook his head in disgust, and walked back to his bunk, where a little later Marian came to sit on the bed beside him.

"I'm sorry for putting you in such a position," she said, staring down at her hands.

"You're not responsible. I wanted you."

"Yes, but. . . ."

"Damn it, Marian, we did nothing wrong. Agnes only made it sound so."

She looked at him. "Oh, Paul, I love you. Last night was the first time in my life that I felt whole, the first time I ever wanted to give myself to a man. I never thought I could feel like that. And now—"

He patted her hand. "We'll just have to wait, Marian. But it won't be forever."

Suddenly he became aware of someone snickering and saw Agnes and three other women at the table grinning at him. He got up and crossed over to them.

"You better be careful, Bub," Agnes chuckled. "All the girls are keeping their eye on you now."

He hesitated for a moment to compose himself, then said in a calm but threatening voice, "From now on, Agnes, you will not address me as Bub."

"Oh?"

"I've had all I can take from you. I've tried reason but

that's pointless. There's only one thing you understand—force. I'm giving you fair warning now to stay out of my way, because I no longer look on you as a woman but as a threat to everyone in this shelter. I won't stand for anything more." He walked around the table and stood next to her. "Now, if you think I don't mean what I say, just call me Bub." His voice rose to a shout. "Come on, call me Bub!"

She looked defiantly up into his face, the corner of her mouth twitching angrily. "O.K., I heard you. You've made your point."

He stood there for a moment staring down at her, then looked around at the women who had gathered. As he walked by them their expressions showed that he had reinstated himself. That evening he made an entry in his diary:

December 26th.

Today I have regained my position as leader with most of the women. But it took the threat of force. Not logic or reason, but force. I know now that there was no other way. I've accepted the fact that, human beings being the way they are, words of reason are like fading whispers, unheard unless backed by force. Force has been the dominant law of all societies. The dead world outside is proof of how wrong it is. Yet now I stand ready to use force against Agnes and she against me. What other choice do I have? With her twisted mind anything is possible. It is a grave mistake to think otherwise. I must be cautious, for I am sure she will react to the position I have placed her in.

X

Early the following morning Mary Spina shook him. "Paul, Paul, wake up."

"What's wrong?"

"It's Mrs. Sheldon. I think . . . I think she's dead."

He sprang out of bed. "Oh, no!" he moaned, looking down at the small figure on the bed. She lay staring straight ahead, her eyes bulging from their sockets and a twisted, terrified expression frozen on her face.

"She's dead, isn't she?" asked Mary Spina.

Paul nodded, then threw back the covers and started to examine the body very carefully.

"What are you looking for?"

Paul turned to the women who by now had gathered around the bed. "Did anyone hear anything during the night?" They looked at each other, puzzled, and he asked, "Who sleeps in the top bunk?"

"I do," said Mrs. Jones.

"You didn't hear anything?"

"Nothing."

"I heard a sort of moaning," said Mrs. Boyer, "but I thought it was just someone having a bad dream."

"You sleep in the next bunk, don't you?" said Paul.

"Yes."

"And you're sure you didn't see anyone?"

Mrs. Boyer shrugged. "Should I have?"

Mary Spina gasped, "Paul, you don't think someone would. . . ? Oh, my God!"

Just then Agnes appeared. "What's happened?" she asked sleepily.

Looking into her face, there was no doubt in Paul's mind that she was responsible. "You know what happened," he said, feeling his anger mounting.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I think Mr. Root thinks someone killed her," said Mrs. Jones.

Agnes' eyes shifted to the dead woman, then back to Paul. "Oh, so you want to blame me, do you? That's what you meant yesterday about getting even with me. You heard him, didn't you, Jones? And you Stewart, you heard him too, right?" She pointed a threatening finger at Paul. "You're the one who killed her, you murdering bastard. You, you killed her."

His blood raced like a hot flash to his head and he felt his body tighten and shake with the rage that finally burst. With the quickness of a cat he sprang, his hands becoming a vise around her thick neck, while slowly he forced her backwards, she digging and pulling at his hands to pry them loose.

"How could you do it?" he hissed, horrified. "You—you animal! You cold-blooded killer! You're not fit to live with people!"

But even in his rage he noticed a look of triumph in her bulging eyes. Some instinct warned him of danger behind him, but before he could react an explosion in the back of his skull robbed his arms of strength for the instant it took Agnes to break free. He turned in time to see Mrs. Jones still swinging the club. He managed to escape that blow, staggering back and groping, semi-conscious. Everything moved in slow motion and the women's voices seemed far away while he was trying desperately to shake clear his head. Then suddenly Agnes was in front of him, the club descending. He fell to the floor, hearing her maddened voice above the muffled screams of the women.

"Murderer! Murderer!"

Then the club struck again and he sank into soundless blackness.

When he drifted back to consciousness he lay very still with eyes closed, believing for a moment that it had all been a bad dream. But then he tasted the stale blood in his mouth and felt the throbbing pain in his arm. Opening his eyes he saw he was in the storeroom. He could see by the distortion and swelling of his right arm, lying across his chest, that it was broken between the wrist and the elbow. Using his good arm he propped himself up, a sharp pain in his chest bringing a groan to his lips, the pain so enveloping that for a minute he thought he would be sick.

"He's awake," called Jones from the doorway.

Paul attempted to swing his legs to the floor, but, feeling some restraint, he stared down in disbelief. Locked around his ankle was a chain.

"No, no, no," he repeated, painfully sliding himself to the bottom of the bed. From his leg the chain extended twice around the frame of the bed, then, about a foot away, circled several times around a one-inch pipe running from ceiling to floor and encasing the wiring from the generators. With his good arm he pulled frantically at the chain, then heard Agnes laugh.

"And to think only this morning you called me an animal. If you could only see yourself now."

"Take this thing off!" he demanded. "Take it off!"

"Now, now, you're in no position to give orders, Bub," she said, tapping his broken arm with the club she carried. He fell back on the bed, the pain washing away his strength. "From now on you'll show a little manners when you talk to me," she said, pulling a box up beside the bed.

"You go to hell," he moaned.

She laughed and sat down. Then she lit a cigar and, leaning over, blew the smoke into his face. "You know, you being a murderer and all, I could have killed you," she said.

"I'm glad I didn't now. Seeing you each day will be something to look forward to. Me and you can talk regular now."

"How long do you think you can get away with this? It's only a matter of time before the women realize you're insane."

"I don't give a damn what the women think. I'm boss now and they'll listen to me. And you know why they'll listen? Because they're scared, that's why. That phony meekness and humble shit is all a coverup for being cowards. Let me give you an example: While you were knocked out we took a vote. Those that thought you guilty were to raise their hands. No in-between; either guilty or not guilty. Only three didn't raise their hands." She laughed. "How do you like them apples, Bub? Only three out of seventeen. And to top it off, I'm the fuckin' hero for catching the killer. You and me know they really don't believe you're guilty, but they're too scared to say so. All I had to do was give them an out by letting them vote. That way they could pretend that everything is on the up and up. But now, see," she said grinning broadly, "they can't admit why they made the decision; that would be admitting just what kind of stinkin' cowards they are. And you thought they gave a shit if you lived or died. I could kill you right now and it wouldn't mean a damn thing to them. All they're worried about is getting their asses out of here alive. Now, you tell me if I'm wrong."

"Even if what you say is true, for their own safety they'll have to turn against you."

"Only if they find another leader. I'll kill, as fast as blink an eye. anyone I suspect of trying to take over. You see I'm not handicapped by any code; I don't have to wait until somebody tries to kill me. I'll kill her first."

She paused. "And let me warn you right now. The very first time you try to break out of those chains I'll kill you."

"It was madmen like you who brought the world to what it is," he said, his body trembling in a cold sweat as he fought back the throbbing dizziness in his head. He knew he might never hear Agnes speak so freely again, and now was

the time to look for some weak point, anything that might help him later.

She continued, "That's where you're wrong. It was the weak and stupid, like you. You sat back and waited until them other countries built the bomb that only we had. Why the hell did you think they were building them? I know; they had a right to protect themselves from us. Well fuck that. Once you let them build the bomb it was all over."

"It was the hope that in time, if we didn't kill ourselves, we could change the world into a better place. You can't understand that, can you? To have believed as you believed admitted no hope of progressing further as human beings."

Then suddenly, in a quick instant, the answer came to mind: *Perhaps that's it. Perhaps like the dinosaurs we had arrived at the end of our reign. Hadn't Spencer said that the final stage of evolution is the first stage of dissolution? Perhaps if man progressed further he would no longer be man but something else not intended. Perhaps. . . .*

"Look," she said. "If you put a picture of a leopard on the wall you write killer under it. That's the way it is—it's born that way. What are you gonna put under a picture of man? I know; reason separates us from other animals. Well, if reason means not killing each other then we ain't got it. Or if we got it we don't use it, and to me that's the same as not having it. Why couldn't you eggheads see what was right in front of your faces? Either you're the boss or the flunky in this goddam world."

"What were you when you were mopping the floors?"

"Never mind what I was. Now is now, and now I'm running things. I'm superior to you because you lost and all your reason ain't worth a shit if you're dead, and that's the power I hold over you—your life."

"Only if I'm afraid to lose it. If you want it, take it. That's the only thing you'll get from me."

She smiled and winked at him. "No, there's more I want from you. You're in for a lot of surprises yet. I'll only kill you if I have to."

"Like you had to kill Mrs. Sheldon?"

"Yeah, to set an example and get you where you are now."

"You're worse than an animal. There's no good at all in you."

"Good? What's good? You hypocrites make me laugh. All the things you preach are lies. You make an issue out of one stinkin' life, yet millions of people were dying of starvation in countries like China and India and what did you good people do? I seen on television that one stinkin' buck would feed a Chink for a week. How much dough was hoarded by those institutions that preached religion? How many lives could they have saved? How many lives could Sheldon have saved with that diamond ring she wore on her finger? How many lives did you save? No, don't try and reach me with that 'good' bullshit, I don't buy it."

She relit the cigar. Then her face took on a tranquil faraway look as she gazed at the thin line of blue smoke that drifted and curled upward. "You know, we're probably the only Americans left, maybe the only people in the whole world. Even if some foreigners made it, they ain't never gonna find us. It'll be like starting all over again and I'll be top man." She paused for a moment, shaking her head slowly.

"Yeah, that'll be something. There has to be plenty of places that wasn't bombed. Can you imagine? The whole goddam United States, mine."

"For how long?" Paul said in a tired voice. It was becoming a great effort now to speak. "It's only a matter of time before everybody dies off."

She smiled. "That's where you come in—if I don't have to kill you. You're the stud."

"You're insane."

"Why? I figured you'd feel a duty to carry on the human race."

"Not under a creature like you."

"Now, now," she said pointing the club at him. "Just

think of the fun you'll have screwing all the girls. Didn't you enjoy Marian? I wish I. . . ."

"Go on, say it. You wish you were a man? That's it, isn't it? You want to—"

Agnes jabbed the club at his swollen arm and he curled over, biting back a scream as another icy, sickening sensation shook his body.

"You see," she said calmly. "Everything was so nice, just the two of us talkin' and all. Now you had to go and spoil it."

A thin line of blood ran down the corner of Paul's mouth and Agnes had become only a shadow.

"I gotta go," she said standing up. "You'll find a bedpan under the cot. You can shout like a crazy man if you want, but if you do I'll have to tie your hands and gag you. It's up to you. Do I have to gag you?"

He managed to shake his head.

She turned and called out to the woman just outside the doorway.

"Hey, Jones, find somebody that knows how to fix a broken arm. We have to take care of our stallion here."

She stood for a moment longer grinning down at Paul who had slipped gratefully back into unconsciousness. She left the room with the air of an undisputed king in a castle, her steps deliberate and easy.

"Is he all right?" exclaimed Marian, rushing up to Agnes.

"Yeah, only a broken arm." She grabbed Marian by the arm when she started toward the storeroom. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I have to see him."

"He's a prisoner. Nobody sees him unless I say so."

"But his arm!"

"We're getting somebody to fix it."

"Then can't I just see him, please?"

"No, I said. And keep away from that room if you know what's good for you." Agnes walked to the table and sat

down, joining the other women.

"What'd he have to say?" asked Stewart.

Agnes didn't answer. She was watching Marian nervously pace the floor. A plan already forming in her twisted mind told her yeah, it would be easy; real easy.

Mrs. Segal, who had some knowledge of first aid, did a fair job of setting Paul's broken arm, but after taping his ribs she told Agnes that she strongly suspected he might be bleeding internally. That evening her suspicions seemed to be correct when Paul passed blood in his urine and his temperature rose to one hundred and five.

For an entire week his fever held, while he drifted in and out of consciousness, often unable to distinguish hallucinations from reality. Finally, on the eighth day, he heard Mrs. Segal tell Agnes that his pulse was so weak she doubted he would last through the day. Death had no terror for him. Constant pain and the helplessness of his position made him welcome it. Why should he struggle? Agnes had won. The women he had tried to protect had turned against him, their cowardice relieving him of all responsibility. Even now their chatter and laughter from the other room gave evidence they were thinking only of their own tomorrows. He was already part of yesterday, like those who had died in the bombings and fallout. So let death come to him. If Agnes' will to rule was stronger than their will to challenge it, let them pay the price.

Then he thought of Marian. What would happen to her? But what could he do for her? Think and plan and hope? As long as one is alive one can do these things. Yes, yes. Mustn't give up . . . have to hold on . . . get better . . . have to . . . have to. . . .

"He's mumbling something," Agnes said.

Opening his eyes he saw her leaning over him and he stared into her face, a face that reflected everything he detested; the arrogant, mocking look of brutish victory, the perverted mind that delighted in bringing misery and terror. He welcomed the hate swelling up inside him. Yes, hate;

hate her. Don't try to understand or find reason for her madness, hate her for what she is. And when the time comes, without pause or guilt kill her as she would kill you.

"You're dying, you know," she said in a calm voice.

"I . . . I won't die," he said with great effort, the words close to a gasp.

"Good. I don't want you to die."

"Won't disappoint you."

"Good, very good."

Feeling a flicker of new life, Paul closed his eyes and lapsed into sleep, knowing that he would not die that day.

Later that evening, just before the lights were turned off, Mrs. Segal came out of the storeroom and went over to Marian's bed. "His fever broke," she said. "It's still high but for the first time in days it's gone down."

"Will he be all right?"

"I'm no doctor but I think he'll pull through." She smiled. "He asked me to tell you not to worry."

"Oh, thank God." Marian buried her face in her hands.

A blanket had been hung over the doorway of the storeroom, further isolating Paul from the rest, and he lay there during the long days that followed, listening to the sounds of activity in the other room, less than twelve feet away but to him as distant as another country. The only one he saw and spoke to was Agnes who, true to her word, visited every day and tormented him in proportion to his recovery. Each day his hate for her intensified. It never entered his mind that her torment was the medicine for his recovery. Yet as the weight of time bore down on him, the inescapable nature of his own personality required for sanity's sake that he occupy this space of time with more than hate. Agnes refused his request for books but surprisingly allowed him his diary. Some pages had been torn out and there were sarcastic notes written beneath each remaining entry. But he was delighted to have pencil and paper.

And so in the following weeks he lived quietly and alone,

regaining his strength, thinking of Marian, making entries in his diary, creating and working out mathematical problems for the sheer need—almost hunger—to exercise his brain, sketching from memory the faces of the women, even some of the scenes he remembered of the now vanished world. But most of all, above everything else, he lived envisioning the day when he would attempt his escape.

Life in the rest of the shelter inevitably changed under Agnes' rule. She had boldly appointed herself leader, challenging anyone who opposed her position, making clear the atmosphere that would prevail. She appointed three of the women she most trusted as sergeants-at-arms. Previously, there had been collapses in discipline, now discipline was strictly enforced. The weekly meetings provided only a pretense of equality; none but Marian and Mrs. Spina ever opposed Agnes. She would listen, then simply overrule them. Yet she welcomed the opposition which gave an aura of fairness to the meetings, knowing this pretense allowed the women to save face and not have to admit that they no longer decided their own fates.

Having thus solidly established herself as undisputed leader, and now ready to proceed with her plans for Paul, Agnes waited patiently until Marian was alone at the table. "I'd like to talk to you," she said in a low voice, sitting down beside her.

Without looking up Marian rose to leave.

"It's about Paul," Agnes added quickly. Marian slowly sank back to her seat. "How long's it been? Must be six or seven weeks since you saw him. How would you like it if I let you talk to him, huh?"

Marian looked at her suspiciously.

"What do I have to do?"

Agnes cautiously checked to see that no one was within earshot. "You've been giving me a lot of trouble at the meetings. I want you to keep your mouth shut. Oh, I could shut it myself if I wanted to, but that would look bad to the others. Well, what do you say?"

"When could I see him?"

"Tonight if you wanted."

Marian sighed. "I—I just don't trust you."

"Forget it then," Agnes snapped, starting to rise.

"Wait. I—er—"

"Look, I got other reasons, too. I could've let him die, right? But I didn't; I patched him up. Now goddammit, the jerk is so depressed I'm afraid he's going to crack up."

"Why are you so concerned about his health?"

"That's my business. You want to see him or not?"

"Yes. I want to see him."

"O.K. then. You gotta keep this under your hat. It wouldn't look good for me if the women knew about it. About a half hour after lights go out Jones will close the bathroom door. That will be your signal. It will be dark, so nobody should see you. When you go into the storeroom, go in quick because we leave a candle burning in there. Don't stay more than ten minutes. Now, you understand everything?"

Marian nodded.

"Remember, nobody's to know. And no more than ten minutes."

Marian lay nervously waiting for what seemed like hours until finally the bathroom door closed. She slid out of bed, quietly crossed the shelter and entered the storeroom. Once inside she stood trembling, listening for any sound from the other room, then she moved toward Paul's bed. In the dim light of the candle she stared down at him and at the chain around his ankle. Sitting down on the edge of the bed she leaned over and kissed him gently on the side of his bearded face. He sprang up to a sitting position, his arms in front of him defensively.

"It's all right, Paul. It's me, Marian," she whispered.

"Marian?" He blinked his eyes. Then he came fully awake, and grabbed and held her tightly to him. "Oh, Marian, it's really you. I thought I was dreaming." Then his body stiffened. He held her at arm's length and looked

cautiously around the room. "But how—? Agnes?"

"Don't worry—it's all right. Agnes knows."

"She knows? You have to get out of here," he said in an urgent voice. "She's tricked you. It has to be a trick."

"No, Paul. You don't understand."

"Believe me, Marian, you're being tricked. Get out of this room right now! Please."

"But. . . ."

"Go on!"

She started for the door, somehow knowing Paul was right, but already it was too late. The lights came on and in the doorway were Jones and Stewart. Marian seemed stunned when they knocked her to the floor and pulled at her clothing.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"We caught them," Jones shouted, finally tearing loose the panties. "We caught them."

Paul, out of bed and standing on one leg, the chain cutting into the other one, strained to come to Marian's rescue. "Leave her alone," he shouted. "For Christ's sake, leave her alone."

Jones lay over Marian's naked body, pinning her arms to the floor. The women poured into the room and stood watching.

"Help her!" Paul shouted, seeing them. "Can't you see what they're doing to her?"

The women stood motionless.

"What's happened?" Agnes rushed into the room.

"We caught them in bed together," Jones said. "She must have slipped in while I was in the bathroom."

"It's a lie," Marian cried.

"You know you planned the whole thing, you maniac," shouted Paul.

"You shut up." Agnes turned to the women. "Did any of you see what happened?"

"When we came in Mrs. Jones was holding Marian on the floor," offered Rita.

"Was she naked like that?"

"Yes."

"They tore her clothes off," Paul protested. "You women know what's happening. Why don't you do something, damn it!"

"They were in bed," maintained Stewart. "We came in and caught them in bed together."

"You and Jones take Marian into the other room," ordered Agnes. "You better tie and gag her or she'll keep everybody up all the goddam night."

"Here's your chance," pleaded Paul to the women. "If you don't do something now it might be one of *you* tomorrow. Don't let them get away with this."

"They're not going to listen to a murderer," said Agnes. She turned to the women. "All right, all of you get back to bed. We'll have a meeting in the morning."

"Wait," pleaded Paul. "Listen to me. Can't you see what she's doing? Wait!" Slowly, without looking back, they filed out of the room. "Go on," he shouted angrily. "You cowards! You all deserve whatever happens to you."

The room was empty now except for Agnes and Mrs. Wagner, Agnes' third sergeant-at-arms.

"O.K., wise guy," Agnes said. "We're gonna tie and gag you now. Make it easy on yourself and get back in bed."

Paul backed up enough to slacken the chain on his leg. They approached him separately, Mrs. Wagner trembling as she held the club over her shoulder. When they were within a few feet he faked toward Agnes and turned quickly, anticipating Mrs. Wagner's move, his fist catching her on the side of her head. She collapsed on the floor like a heavy sack of potatoes. The chain on his leg didn't allow him to fully escape Agnes' blow, but the club glanced off his shoulder and before she could strike again he lunged. Both fell to the floor, Agnes trying to roll out of his reach, he keeping a firm grip on her thighs. Because of her awkward position her repeated blows had little effect. He pulled her to him with all his strength, climbing up her body until his hands reached

her neck. Dropping the club she started to punch and dig his face. Just a little more, he told himself; a little more and he could smash her head against the concrete floor. But time was in Agnes' favor. Jones and Stewart were rushing to her defense. He rolled and reached for the club next to Mrs. Wagner, only two inches away. He got to his feet just in time to duck Jones' club. Her momentum had carried her close, giving him a chance to hit her flush in the mouth and feel a wonderful sense of satisfaction as her teeth collapsed behind his fist. As he turned back toward Agnes her club struck his temple and dropped him unconscious.

He awoke the following morning when the lights came on to find his hands tied behind his back and a gag stuffed in his mouth, but, except for a slight headache, no injuries. He was surprised to be alive. Having failed in his attempt to kill Agnes the night before he expected to be killed. Why then was he alive? Because he was the only male to make possible that new kingdom Agnes madly envisioned? That had to be it. He was alive for one purpose—to be at stud. That was why she hadn't killed him the first time, and why she sent Marian in to him; it was all part of her plan. Marian—what would they do to her?

Just then Agnes entered the room, pulled a box up to the bed and sat down. "How you feeling this morning, tough guy? You know, you're a lot tougher than I figured. You should see Jones; you knocked out half her teeth." Agnes laughed and patted him on the stomach. "You better be careful from now on, though. She's making a spear out of a knife and mop handle and told me she's going to stick you right in your gut if you try anything again." Leaning over, Agnes pulled the gag out of his mouth.

It took a moment before he could speak. "Why did you have to bring Marian into it? She can't hurt you. Why don't you leave her alone?"

"It's not my fault; it's yours. If you got off your high and mighty horse I wouldn't bother her."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what the hell I mean—I want you start screwing the women."

"What's that got to do with Marian?"

"Everything. You're different from the others—you're not afraid to die—so I got to use different tactics."

"Marian," said Paul, shaking his head.

"Yeah, Marian." Agnes smiled. "No matter how you look at it you got to eventually give in. By now you know nobody is going to help you and Marian. I'll do what I have to do, even if it means cutting her up piece by piece right in front of your eyes."

"Why couldn't I have killed you last night?"

"Yeah. That's something to look forward to, ain't it? Maybe you'll get lucky next time, if there is a next time. Twice I gave you a break. Next time, no matter what, I'll kill you. I'm having a meeting this morning and I want to tell them you're willing to . . . to accommodate them if they want you. Are you going to go along with that or you going to give me trouble?"

He stared at her in silence.

"Well?" she said after a moment.

He didn't answer.

She grabbed him by the hair and smacked his face on both sides. "Look, you bastard," she said angrily, "you might think I'm bullshitting about Marian but I ain't." She waited. "Are you going to answer me? No? O.K. then, if that's how you want it." She turned her head and shouted, "Jones, come in here."

Jones came through the door, her face so discolored and swollen that she was barely recognizable. Her lips protruded past her nose, above and below them strips of tape where the teeth had gone through. She shook her finger at Paul. "You'll be sorry for doing this to me, mister," she said, her voice quivering. "You just wait and see."

"Go in the other room and get Marian," Agnes ordered.

"I want to let that son-of-a-bitch know he's not going to get away with this."

"Goddam you, go get Marian, I said!"

"No, wait," said Paul.

"Hold it, Jones." Agnes looked at him. "Well?"

"You win."

Agnes sat back on the box and slapped her knees. "Good," she said, smiling. "Now you're getting smart."

"Did you hurt Marian?"

"She's not hurt."

"I want to see her."

"Later."

"Now," he said firmly.

"O.K., O.K., I'll get her for you." She stood up. "See. You give an inch and I give an inch, right?"

Marian was lying on the bed facing the wall, her hands and feet tied behind her and her pants stuffed in her mouth.

Agnes sat on the bed beside her. "I'm going to untie you, but first I want you to listen very carefully," she said in a low voice, knowing the women at the table were watching them. "By now you must know that I'm running things around here. If I want to, I could kill you both. You believe that, don't you?"

Marian turned, the covers sliding down to expose her bare breast.

Agnes pushed her back over on her side to untie her hands. "You keep your mouth shut and nobody is going to get hurt. If you start any shit you're only going to make it harder on the two of you."

Marian herself pulled out the gag and sat up, her eyes darting to the women and back to Agnes before her shoulders slumped. She sighed heavily and sat for a moment blankly staring at her hands. Finally she threw the covers back and started to untie her feet, all resistance gone.

"O.K., get dressed. He wants to see you." Agnes rose from the bed and walked over to where the women were. "As soon as you girls finish eating, clear the table. We're going to have a meeting."

Marian dressed and walked across the room, her eyes

avoiding the women. Just as she got to the table Jones grabbed her shoulders and shook her roughly, shouting, "See what your nice, brainy guy did to me?" Marian looked blankly into her face. "That's it; take a good look, bitch."

"Shut up," Agnes said, pushing Jones aside and taking Marian's arm to lead her into the storeroom. "Here she is. She's not hurt."

For a long silent moment Paul and Marian exchanged stares.

"Are you all right, Marian?"

She nodded.

"Satisfied?" asked Agnes.

"I want to talk to her alone," he said emphatically.

"Don't get carried away, Bub. You're not holding the trump cards; I am."

"If you want me to cooperate you'll let me see her alone. That's not asking much."

Agnes looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. "O.K.; you got a few minutes."

Marian, sitting on the bed beside him, leaned over, took his face between her hands and kissed him softly on the lips. "It seems I'm always doing things to hurt you," she said, tears spilling down her face. "Forgive me for being so stupid."

"Don't blame yourself. Agnes would have found some way to get what she wants from me."

"What does she want?"

"Children."

Marian's mouth dropped open. "Is that what you meant by cooperating?"

Paul half smiled. "Not with her. With the other women. She wants *them* to bear children."

"Why?"

"We don't have much time; I'll explain later. Now I want you to listen to me. Agnes killed Mrs. Sheldon. She's capable of anything. You must go along with her. Don't provoke her in any way, because if she turns against you none of the

women will help you. I know it's hard but it won't be forever. She can't be on guard all the time. It's just a matter of staying alive until an opportune moment comes. I promise you I'll get out of these chains and when I do, everything will be all right. But for now you have to play along."

"Will you kill her when the time comes?"

"I'll do what I have to."

Marian buried her face against his neck. "Oh, Paul, I'm so frightened. If anything happens to you I wouldn't want to live."

"All right, that's it," said Agnes, coming in and pulling Marian to her feet. "Go in the other room. We're going to have a meeting in a few minutes." After Marian left she said, "She's really stuck on you, ain't she? I bet if I let you two alone last night you would have had her in bed anyway."

"Shut up! You got what you wanted."

Agnes laughed and shook her head. "You know, you're a queer guy, even for one of them egghead stargazers. Most guys would be screwing their asses off in a spot like this. What is it with you, don't you like women?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Sure, you rest now. You're going to need it," she chuckled.

Paul's eyes filled with hate watching her leave the room. Then he sighed and rolled over on his side to try to think. How could any of the women have the courage to be alone with him, the audacity to expect him to copulate on order? And was it even possible for a civilized man to have an erection while feeling strong contempt and revulsion? He doubted it. It was all madness. Unbelievable, that such women as they could regress to such a primitive stage in so short a period of time. Yet historically he had to remember that after the fall of their empire, many Romans had gone back to living in caves; they had lost their language, eaten raw meat and behaved like men who had died in the same caves thousands of years before. So, yes, it was possible.

Anything was possible with humans. Progress and regression are a mere matter of direction.

From the other room he heard the meeting being called to order.

"You all know why I called this meeting. Last night Paul and Marian were at it again. Ain't that right, Marian?"

He wondered how Marian signified acquiescence.

"Then he broke his word," said his former secretary Rita, almost cheerfully. He knew her voice.

"That's right," Agnes continued. "But I've been thinking. You can't blame him. We've been in here for nine months now. I can't expect you girls not to have feelings, either. What the hell, we're all human. This morning he admitted he broke his word and said he would be available if any of you want him."

"But he's a murderer," Mrs. Richardson exclaimed.

"What do you want from me? I'm not telling anyone they got to. If you want to get laid he's available, that's all."

A few of the women chuckled nervously.

"That's right," said one. "Speak for yourself, Richardson."

"Did he really say he was willing?" Rita asked.

"I wouldn't say it if he didn't," Agnes replied.

"I know Paul." That was Mary Spina, sounding sorrowful. "I can't believe he would submit to something like this."

"Why not?" snapped Rita. "A Ph.D.'s human too, you know."

Mary Spina spoke again. "What kind of women are you? You say you believe he's a murderer and yet. . . ."

"Well, I don't think we have a choice, do we?" Rita interrupted. "I mean, he's the only man. You have to be practical in a situation like this."

"I agree with Rita," said Mildred. "We don't have a choice."

Mary Spina's voice rose to a high pitch. "Oh, you all

make me sick. I'm sick of this masquerade we're living. I'm sick. . . ."

"Shut up!" Agnes shouted, sounding as though she had pushed back her chair to stand and bang the table. "I'm sick of you. I took enough of your shit. You're guilty of causing a lot of trouble in here. I won't put up with any more of it. Now sit down before I knock you down!"

He could imagine Mary Spina looking at the women around the table, and they turning their eyes away. The room fell into a heavy silence. Suddenly she would be feeling frightfully alone, and fear like an icy chill would pass over her. Poor Mary, he thought.

"From here on in, I'm not going to stand for any more of this bullshit," Agnes continued. "I got a responsibility to keep order in this shelter and I'm going to do it. Any more troublemakers are to be punished and that's all there is to it. You get out of line and you get punished. I've been doing my best to make things easier for all of you." She came over to the doorway leading into his prison room. "I don't care if you want to fuck or not," Agnes said, pinning up a paper. "But if you do, just put your name down and a date beside it." She turned back to the women. "Any questions?"

Silence.

"O.K. then. Meeting's adjourned."

Less than an hour later he had seen three put their names on the appointment sheet, Rita's being the first.

The lights had no sooner gone out than Rita entered the storeroom, wearing only a short black slip and her shoes. She moved gracefully across the dim room and stopped at the foot of the bed.

Paul, propping himself up on one arm, eyed her coldly. "Somehow I knew you'd be the first."

She was wearing makeup and her long hair hung straight down over her shoulders, dark and oily from not being washed.

"Are you disappointed?" She took a deep breath, her full breasts softly rising beneath the dark silk.

He shook his head. "You can't get it through your thick skull that I don't want you, can you?"

She smiled confidently. "Now, you know you don't really mean that."

He could see the wild excitement in her eyes as she bent over, slipped her shoes off then, standing erect, slowly pulled the slip over her head and dropped it to the floor.

"Look at me," she said in a heavy voice, moving forward. "Look at me and tell me you don't want me." She took his hand and pressed it against her firm stomach, but he pulled it back.

"I don't. Haven't you any pride, Rita?"

She laughed softly and started to get into the bed.

"Get out of here," he said firmly, pushing her.

"What's wrong with you?" Her confidence seemed finally shaken. "You told Agnes you were willing."

He stared silently, then sighed and, shaking his head, slid over in the bed.

Her hair carried a heavy scent of perfume as she leaned over and kissed him. "You won't be sorry, Doctor, dear," she whispered. "I'll please you. Haven't I always tried to? In lesser ways?"

Her body moved over his like a sheet of warm silk, lightly touching, pressing, squirming. His stillness and lack of response only intensified her passion. He heard her low, throaty moans, felt her darting tongue, the tingle of her long hair trailing down his body to settle on his thighs. Suddenly, angrily, playing him false, he felt his body come alive, the blood coursing through veins and throbbing in his muscles, demanding release. He grabbed her hair, pulled her roughly up to him, buried his head in her neck to escape that hungry mouth, and rolled over on her. His hands dug into the soft flesh of her buttocks while his body jerked violently, without rhythm, moving only to take and to inflict pain. But she cried out in wild urgency, her teeth biting into his shoulder,

her body rising to meet each brutal thrust until finally he felt the life spurt out of him and he rolled away in disgust. Both were silent for a long while. Then she leaned over him and tried to kiss him. Full of self-loathing, he pushed her away and pantingly hissed, "Get away from me! Get out . . . get out of here before I kill you."

Without hesitation she climbed out of the bed and gathered her slip and shoes from the floor. Then she brushed the long hair back off her face. "I pleased you," she said triumphantly. "You can't deny that."

"Get out!" he yelled, his voice exploding in the small room.

There came a coarse laugh. Although he couldn't distinguish the face peering through the doorway he knew it was Agnes'. Rita pulled the slip over her head and left.

"You weren't funny," she said, waving her shoes at Agnes. "I'm entitled to privacy."

"Shut up and go to bed, bitch."

"It's not fair. You have no right to—"

"Shut up."

"Hey, Rita," someone called out, "you'll sleep good tonight."

"How was it, Rita? Was it good?"

"Go to hell."

"Come on, Rita, tell us about it."

"Shut up!" Marian cried out. "All of you, shut up."

"What's the matter, honey?" someone snickered. "You want him all for yourself?"

"O.K., knock it off!" Agnes commanded.

There were a few grumbles, then the shelter fell silent.

Long after everyone else slept Marian lay awake, still quietly weeping. Was Paul awake? What was he thinking? Feeling? Several times she had an urge to run to him but better judgment prevailed. She was a prisoner as surely as he. There was a tightening in her chest. What would happen tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? Rolling over in the bed, she buried her head in the pillow and sobbed.

Three weeks later Paul was accommodating eight of the eighteen women. He had managed to shame away only one of the original nine. "Surprisingly," he noted in his diary, "I am able to respond, being both physical and mental, man and beast. I can make myself loose the animal, my mind shamefully occupying itself with the single purpose of the task before me. How very strange we humans are! In some study on sexual behavior under given conditions, I should qualify as an excellent specimen. Perhaps some psychiatrist would say that the sexual desire lies latent in the dark cells of my mind. He might be right. I only know that it takes concentrated effort to bring myself to a state where I am able to copulate, where given the choice I would not."

Agnes grew impatient when none of the women showed any initial signs of pregnancy. At the end of six weeks she tore the appointment sheet off the wall. Thereafter, only those women who were within the probable time of ovulation were allowed the privilege waiting in the storeroom, charts being kept on all menstrual cycles. This led to Paul having sometimes to accommodate two women on the same day. Agnes increased his ration of food and gave him large doses of vitamins dissolved in the liquids he drank. Now that sex was openly accepted, some of the women turned to each other for their sexual pleasure, and a new rule was made: with mutual consent all acts between two people were permissible.

XI

On June second, Agnes brought out six bottles of whiskey to celebrate the first anniversary of the shelter. Paul was by then accommodating ten of the eighteen women, three of the older ones having turned strictly homosexual, joining Agnes; only Mrs. Spina, Mrs. Levin, and Mrs. Richardson and her daughter Mary kept to themselves.

Paul waited anxiously for Marian the following evening. Twice a month she was allowed to come to him, usually to spend the night. "How wonderful you look," he said when finally she entered, taking her in his arms.

"Are you well?" she said. "You seem to have lost weight."

"I'm eating everything, but lately I've been kept busy." He smiled, for in spite of everything he wanted to be cheerful.

"Oh, Paul, every night when someone comes in here it breaks my heart."

"Let's not talk about it."

"It's just that I hear *them* talking about you and—"

"They're nothing. You're the only one who matters to me. Please, Marian, forget about them tonight."

She looked at him and smiled, a sad smile. "I'm sorry. I'm . . . it's just that I love you so much."

He drew her down to sit beside him. "Now tell me, has Agnes bothered you?"

"Not at all. But I'm afraid for Mrs. Richardson."

"Why?"

"Agnes celebrated last night. It was worse than the Christmas party; everyone drunk. Some of the women carried on so shamefully with each other that Agnes had to stop them. It's hard to believe they were once decent women."

"What happened with Mrs. Richardson?"

"Do you remember at Christmas when Agnes offered her daughter a drink? Well, she did the same thing last night, only more persistently. Mrs. Richardson smacked the glass of whiskey out of her hand and warned her to stay away from Mary."

"What did Agnes do?"

"That's just it; she didn't do anything you would expect. She smiled and apologized to Mrs. Richardson. After that she didn't say another word to either of them."

"Yes; that's not at all like Agnes. She must have something up her sleeve. You'd better warn Mrs. Richardson to be on guard."

"I did. But of all the women in the shelter I believe she's the only one who honestly thinks you killed Mrs. Sheldon."

"Then you better warn Mary."

"Do you really think Agnes would hurt her?"

"I think Agnes has something else in mind for Mary."

"Oh, Paul, she *wouldn't*. I mean, how could she? Her mother is always with her."

"Tell Mary to be careful. That's all you can do."

Marian shook her head despairingly. "If only you were free. When, Paul? When?"

"I don't know. I'm watched like a hawk." He pulled at the chain. "And this confounded thing!"

Marian knelt on the floor and lifted his foot into her lap. "The chain's so tight. Does it hurt much?"

"No, the skin's become calloused."

Gently she rubbed the ankle and foot. "It seems so hopeless."

Paul took her hands and pulled her up to the bed. "Don't start thinking like that. Every morning they take the chain off the pipe when they bring me to the washroom. One

morning they'll become careless. We have to be patient. I'll only have one chance at it."

She gave him a look of mingled fear and admiration—fear of the consequences if he failed, admiration for his courage to attempt escape. Knowing she would share his fate sent a tingle down her spine. Then her look turned warm and womanly.

"I love you," she said, and when he pulled her back on the bed and kissed her, she whispered, "You don't have to make love to me. I know how tired you must be."

He laughed. "Now, isn't that a way to put off a fellow?" His arms tightened around her.

She moaned softly, then chuckled. "You'd better not squeeze so hard, you might hurt the baby."

He sat up, his mouth dropping open. "Baby?"

"I think so."

"Why—why didn't you tell me?" he exclaimed. "I could have hurt you."

"Don't be silly; I come from hardy stock." He became so serious that she looked anxiously at him. "Aren't you pleased?"

He kissed her hands. "Certainly I'm pleased . . . only . . . does anyone else know you're pregnant?"

"No, not yet."

"You mustn't tell anyone. No one. If Agnes finds out she might not let us be together any more."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said in panic. "But I can't keep something like this a secret for long; they're bound to notice. Oh, Paul, I couldn't stand it if I couldn't see you. I'd rather not have the baby."

"Now, don't start worrying. I imagine it will be some time before you start to show. Come on now," he said, lifting her chin, then enveloping her in a tender embrace.

It was a few days later that Mary Richardson entered the storeroom. She glanced over at Paul lying on the bed, then

quickly disappeared behind the partition of boxes.

"Mary," he called. "What are you doing in here?"

She came from behind the boxes and timidly held out a sheet of paper. "I'm on the cooking detail this week. Mrs. Jones sent me in here to gather this list of supplies."

"How have you been, Mary?" he said, sitting up. He had not seen the girl for months.

"Fine, Mr. Root."

"Have you been reading much? I guess that's a foolish question—by now I'll warrant you've finished all the books." He sighed. "I certainly miss them."

"Yes."

"You know, Mary, I think you should watch out for. . . ."

"Forgive me, Mr. Root," she interrupted, looking down at the floor, "but my mother thinks it best I don't speak with you."

"Perhaps your mother is right," he said after a pause. "But I want you to know that I'm not guilty of what Agnes accused me of. I'm sure you don't really believe I could do such a thing."

"I don't know what to believe," she mumbled, nervously fingering the sheet of paper. "I'm sorry, Mr. Root. Honest I am."

Feeling her embarrassment, he smiled. "That's all right, Mary. I understand."

She made a feeble gesture, as though she were going to say something. Then she sighed, turned, and again disappeared behind the crates. Paul reached under the mattress for his diary, and in very small letters wrote:

Mary, Mary, girl of golden blond; innocent child forced to live in this gloomy tomb of perversion. Sad, sad, sad. . . .

"What are you looking for, honey?" said Agnes, coming up behind the girl.

Mary spun around. "I'm—I'm—" Her eyes shifted to the doorway, then back.

"What's the matter, honey? You seem nervous."

"Nothing. It's just that you . . . you startled me. I didn't hear you come in."

Agnes smiled and placed her hand on Mary's shoulder. Mary jerked away, her arm coming up in front of her.

"You ain't frightened of me, are you?"

"No, it's . . . it's just that I have to finish with the supplies. Mrs. Jones is waiting for them."

"Oh, don't worry about Jones. I told her I was coming in here to talk to you."

"Talk to me?"

"Yeah. It's about your mother." Agnes took Mary by the shoulders and guided her to a sitting position on the first of two rows of crates rising approximately two feet from the floor. "You know your mother was out of line the other day," she said, sitting down beside her. "She made me look like a fool, smacking that glass out of my hand and threatening me."

"She didn't mean it. She was just angry because you wanted me to drink the whiskey."

"I know, honey. But you're a big girl now, you can make up your own mind." Agnes leaned back and started gently rubbing the back of Mary's shoulders. "I can't allow your mother to make a fool of me again. I guess if it wasn't for you, honey, I might have hurt her."

"She didn't mean anything, Agnes; honest she didn't."

"I know, I know," Agnes continued in a soft, childlike voice. "But if I let her act like that, pretty soon the rest of them will be doing the same thing. I got responsibilities in here. You understand that, don't you, honey?"

"I'll explain to my mother."

"That's a good girl," Agnes said, her hands now moving down Mary's back and then forward, coming together around her flat stomach. "Christ, I wouldn't want to hurt your mother. Know why, honey? Because if I hurt her I

know it would hurt you and I wouldn't want to do that."

Suddenly Mary was aware of the hands, and the warm breath on the back of her neck. "I better finish with the supplies," she said, trying to rise.

Agnes held her firmly. "Don't worry about the supplies. I told Jones not to bother us."

"But I have to," said Mary, her voice starting to tremble. "Please let me go?"

"What's the matter with you? Don't you understand what I'm trying to tell you? I want to be your friend, your special friend. That way I'll make sure nothing happens to you and your mother. Now, are we going to be friends or ain't we?"

Mary closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Yes, but—"

"I like you, Mary. I like you a lot." One of Agnes' hands had already slid to Mary's thigh, the other cupping a small breast. "Oh, you're so firm," she whispered. "So young and firm."

Mary felt a cold shiver run through her body. She pulled at the offending hands. "Please don't; please."

But Agnes pressed her back on the boxes, her hand beneath Mary's dress, pulling at her panties, and her voice crooning, "Relax, baby; I won't hurt you. Just relax and let me show you how much I like you."

Mary's body went rigid. The sharp probing of Agnes' fingers was to her like being mauled by some wild animal. Helplessly she threw her hands over her face and bit down on her lips to choke back the scream that would surely bring her mother.

From the other side of the room Paul heard her terrified sobs. He moved as far as he could toward the partition of crates, calling out, "Mary, are you all right? Mary, answer me!" A moment passed, then he heard her muffled whimper. "For God's sake, Agnes, leave her alone!" he shouted. "She's only a child." Pulling the chain he lay on the floor, stretching himself within reach of the boxes and banging on them with his fist, hoping to stop what was surely happening.

To shout for the women would bring Mrs. Richardson, who would be no match for Agnes in the ensuing struggle. In slow and terrible defeat he got up from the floor and went back to his bed. There was nothing he could do—nothing to prevent the cruelest kind of ravishment. He was helpless to rescue that innocent girl.

At the door of the room he heard arguing and in a moment, both Mrs. Richardson and Jones came crashing through and fell to the floor. Mrs. Richardson rose quickly and rushed over to Mary who was sitting, face buried in hands, sobbing hysterically. "What happened?" she shouted, shaking her. "What did she do to you?" Then she took Mary in her arms and burst into tears. "Oh, what did she do to you? Tell me, darling; tell Mommy."

Mary twisted away and ran into the other room.

"Nobody hurt your daughter," said Agnes. "Don't get so excited."

Mrs. Richardson stared, in her eyes a furious blaze of hatred. Then her body started to shake, the anger erupting into a scream. "You pig. You filthy pig. You perverted—" She spun around and, pushing aside the women gathered in the doorway, ran out of the room and over to a wall cabinet.

"Put the carving knife back," Marian pleaded, stepping in front of her. "You're the one who'll be hurt. Put it back, please, Mrs. Richardson. We can all settle this."

"Get out of my way," she hissed, waving the knife at Marian. "I'm going to kill her."

Agnes came through the doorway. "Let her go," she said in a calm voice.

Suddenly Mary, realizing what was happening, sat up in her bed, a terrified look on her face. "No, Mother, don't," she cried. She started to rise, but Mrs. Jones held her down.

"So you want to kill me," Agnes said, taking the club that Stewart handed her. "If you're smart you'll put the knife down. Now!"

Marian made a desperate attempt to grab Mrs.

Richardson, but she lashed out with the knife, cutting Marian's hand. "Stay out of it," she shouted, her eyes never leaving Agnes. "Don't you understand? I'm doing this for all of us. Root was right; she's not fit to live with people." Then suddenly she lunged toward Agnes, who leaped to one side and struck her across the arm with the club. The knife flew across the floor.

Agnes stepped back and pointed to the knife. "Go on," she said. "You wanted to kill—get the knife."

Cautiously Mrs. Richardson inched toward it, but when she bent over to pick it up, Agnes, springing forward with her club gripped the way a baseball player holds a bat, hauled back and struck her across the side of her face with such force that Mrs. Richardson did a complete somersault. Mary pulled away from Mrs. Jones and ran to her mother, kneeling down and gently turning her head. When she saw the disfigured face she gasped.

"Help her! Somebody come help her!"

Marian knelt down beside them and leaned over. When she looked up at Mary there were tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Oh God, no," Mary cried, tenderly placing her mother's head in her lap and rocking back and forth, her light blue skirt soon turning red. "Don't die, Mommy; please don't die," she kept repeating in a helpless voice.

All the women stood silently staring down at the girl and her mother, some softly weeping, others frozen in shock, their hands across their mouths.

Mary looked up at them. "Please, please, won't somebody help her?"

Mrs. Spina leaned over and took Mary's arm. "She's gone, Mary. There's nothing anyone can do."

"You all saw what happened," Agnes said. "It was self-defense."

"You killed her," screamed Mary. "You said you wouldn't hurt her and you did."

The knife was lying on the floor a few feet from her. She eased her mother's head from her lap, grabbed the knife and got to her feet.

Agnes quickly stepped forward and pulled the knife from her hand. "Your mother wanted to kill me," she said sternly. "I had to defend myself."

Mary pounded on Agnes' chest with her fist. "Liar, liar, liar," she screamed, bursting into tears.

Marian and Mrs. Spina took Mary by the arms and urged her to her bed. There she buried her face in the pillow, her body shaking with great racking sobs. A few minutes later Mrs. Segal injected a sedative and before long the sobs faded to whimpers and she was asleep.

When she awoke the shelter was silent and dark except for a single candle flickering on the table. Her eyes scanned the room. No one moved but she knew they were awake, she could feel their eyes staring at her through the dark in the terrifying stillness, as if each held her breath waiting for something to happen. Slowly, almost reluctantly, her eyes moved toward the washroom. A thin line of light streaked beneath the door. Suddenly she felt cold, colder than she could ever remember. She wanted so desperately to curl back beneath the covers, but the line of light pulled at her like a magnet.

Almost as though she were sleepwalking she rose and moved across the room. Arms reached out for her, a gentle hand touched her shoulder.

"Come back to bed, Mary," said Mrs. Spina.

"Where's my mother?"

"Come on, Mary. Come back to bed."

"Mommy. Where's my mommy?"

The hand reached around her shoulder. "It's better if you come back to bed, child. You're in a state of shock."

"Mommy," she screamed, pushing Mrs. Spina aside and rushing to throw the washroom door open. The light exploded in her face. For an instant she stood there frozen, speechless, mouth hanging open, her look one of naked hor-

ror. Then her body became rigid, expanding in the chest as she sucked in air, making a sound like an inward scream. There was a momentary silence, then a horrible piercing shriek, and Mary collapsed on the floor.

Marian and Mrs. Spina lifted and carried her limp body to the bed. Then Agnes appeared in the doorway, her body blood-streaked, angrily mumbling to herself. Then she turned and slammed the door shut behind her.

From that day on Mary neither spoke nor showed any sign of recognition, but lived within her own dark world, moving ghostlike around the shelter. For a few days there was an atmosphere of shame, as if everyone felt partial responsibility. But in a very short time the sight of Mary became nothing more than a reminder, a deterrent to anyone who thought to challenge Agnes' rule.

Every other day she called meetings, angrily complaining about minutiae, then threatening death on the mere suspicion of anyone planning to supplant her as leader. She was suspicious of everyone. She had all the knives, forks and spoons locked away, forcing the women to eat with their fingers. She grew more and more impatient over the women's failure to become pregnant, turning brutally bitter, striking several of them out of sheer frustration. Each day became worse than the day before, so it wasn't long before there was a complete and general collapse of morale. Except for cooking, most of the chores went undone. For hours on end no one spoke, the shelter becoming as silent as a church in the afternoon. Most of the women lay quietly in their bunks, rising only to eat, while a few paced the floor, back and forth, throughout the day and half the night like lunatics. Neither bodies nor clothing were washed, so that within a month the shelter looked and smelled like a den of wild animals.

It was within Agnes' power to change things, but she had become too preoccupied with tormenting Paul. She barraged him unendingly with insults about his virility. She struck him once when he started singing at the top of his voice to drown

out her nagging; after that he silently endured her insults, convinced that she had gone completely insane and was more dangerous than ever. He still received large portions of food, but the food was either heavily dosed with salt or there was no salt at all. Where previously he had been taken to the washroom in the early morning, now he waited for hours before being allowed to relieve himself. He somehow endured, for he knew, one way or another, it would be over when he attempted escape. It took great restraint to wait. Time was slicing deeper and deeper, pulling at his mind like the undercurrent of a sea tearing at a shoreline. He knew something must give. Only an increasingly thin wall separated him from madness.

August 2nd.

One nightmare ends only to awaken to another. Except for the time I have with Marian my days are like pages in a book, each page containing but one word: Disgust. It has become inescapable, interweaving itself into my brain like a fibre of dry rot. The very air I breathe leaves my body contaminated with hate, contempt, the ugliest of emotions that have merged in this consuming disgust. All my senses have been infected. My eyes loathe the sight of the women with their tangled hair and filthy bodies. My stomach turns from their touch and smell. I am forced daily to listen to a maniac until my head swells and I am overcome with an urge to scream. And night after night the women with their deep moans of pleasure; no, not pleasure any longer, a pitiful sound that reassures them they still live. To watch them stagger from my bed, grunting and mumbling back into their own nightmares, human dignity gone, perhaps should make me feel pity. But there is only disgust. And what have I become? In spite of everything I still have erections to meet their passion—sink myself into their insides and leave my sperm. Perhaps because I also must reassure myself that I am alive.

How will it end? It must end . . . soon. I can't stand this depression much longer. I try to shake it but I can't. It's like a cancer eating away inside me that I'm helpless to cut out. Marian is coming tomorrow. Have patience; hold on a little longer.

Paul awoke about five A.M. It was not unusual; being confined in neither morning nor night made all parts of the day become one. Marian's naked body lay close against him, soft, warm, her full breasts pressing into his side. He hadn't slept well, with both of them in the small bed. But thinking now of the new life inside her, his fingertips glided across her smooth skin and down her body. Opening his hand he lay it flat against the swelling where the skin was becoming taut. It wouldn't be long now before her pregnancy was noticed, he thought. Time was running out.

She stirred, turning her head, her lips brushing his shoulder. He gently kissed her forehead, then with his head back on the pillow he stared into her face, realizing in full how very much he loved and needed her. He was just lying there enjoying that rare and blissful moment when he heard it.

Living in fear sharpens a man's senses and he stopped breathing to listen. Then he heard again what sounded like the chirping of a bird coming down through the ventilation duct. His mind must be playing tricks on him. *No birds could have survived.* He shook Marian, putting his hand over her mouth; the slightest noise might cause that precious sound to disappear. Allaying her fear, he whispered for her to listen. There was a puzzled look in her eyes and she started a question but he put his fingers to her lips. Then the sound came again.

"What was that?" she whispered, sitting up in the bed.

"I'm not sure. Get up closer to the air duct; I think it's coming from there."

She slipped out of bed, quietly crossed the room and stood on the boxes. After ten minutes, hearing nothing, she climbed back into bed.

"What did it sound like to you?" he asked.

"Like . . . like a bird. Could it be?"

"I don't know, but that's what it sounded like to me, too. Christ, do you realize what it means if it were? It means somehow a bird survived—in a cave perhaps, and that the atmosphere is now clean enough to support life."

"But the conelrad radio announcer said—"

"They could have been wrong," he interrupted. "There's so much we don't know about radiation."

"Oh, Paul, Paul," she said excitedly, "this hell could be ending; we could leave it." She started to cry softly.

"Don't get your hopes too high. We can't be sure; and even if it were a bird we heard, leaving here won't be that easy. There's Agnes, you know. As long as she thinks we have to stay here I'm safe. If she found out we could leave I'm sure she'd kill me."

Marian's body stiffened. "Why? Why would she have to?"

"She knows she's gone too far. She could perhaps control the women, but with me around, once outside they would turn against her. Blaming her for their subjugation and both murders would provide an excuse."

"What if there's no one alive out there?"

"The probability of everyone being killed seems too enormous, especially since countries in the southern hemisphere had time to prepare for the fallout. I'll have to act soon. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But suppose we're wrong? Suppose it's not a bird we hear. Can't we wait and be sure?"

"There's no time. If we're right and Agnes hears it, then it might be too late. Besides, what's the difference? I can't take any more of this."

He lay back on the bed. Over the last weeks he had thought of a plan—simple enough, but one requiring both timing and luck; there would be no second chance. If he failed Agnes would kill him. With the price of a life becoming a life, whose would it be? He had seen Agnes in action. She was a brute of a woman. No matter how his plans came

out, one of them would die. Of this he was certain and he did not befuddle his mind beyond that conclusion.

"It will have to be in the morning when they take me to the washroom," he said. "Both Stewart and Jones walk behind me, Stewart holding the chair and Jones with that damn spear of hers."

"What about Agnes?"

"Lately she just sits and watches. If she walks with them I'll have to postpone it to the following day. Now listen to me and do exactly as I tell you. Tomorrow morning when they come for me, I want you to go to the outside shelter door. When I reach the end of the table on the way to the washroom you're to scream and grab the wheel. Hopefully your scream will distract them. Under no circumstances are you to do more. You understand that?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Try and pull the chain loose and take the spear from Jones."

"But there are four of them—with Mrs. Wagner and Agnes. Oh, Paul, it's too dangerous."

"I don't think Wagner and Stewart have any real heart for their roles. I'm only worried about Agnes and Jones."

"But—"

"Listen, Marian. I know it's dangerous and risky but what other choice do I have? Christ, how long do you think I can go on living like this, not knowing what's happening to you, and now the baby?"

She reached up and took his face in her hands. He could feel them trembling.

"Don't be frightened," he said.

"I want you," she whispered.

"What?"

"I want you to make love to me."

"Now?"

"Please."

He smiled and leaned over and kissed her lips, her neck; then the tip of his tongue caressed the nipple of her breast.

Looking up he saw she was staring at him, her mind locked in that moment. He climbed on top of her, knowing far back in the shadow of his passion that it might be the last time.

Not wanting Agnes to see them, Marian left him when the lights came on, and he pulled over his head the jumper she had made for him to wear because the chain was never taken off his leg. He sat on the edge of the bed and glanced up at the ventilation duct.

"Come on, bird," he whispered. "If you're really out there, let me know—please."

For long over a year the world had been the shelter and he hadn't thought of the outside. But now, with this slither of hope, he wondered how it looked. He remembered having read that the Hiroshima radiation had stimulated plant life, causing flowers to blossom brilliantly over the surrounding countryside. Foolishly optimistic, he had promised Marian that when they left the shelter they would go off by themselves and watch the first day pass from sunrise to sunset. "Just the two of us alone, no matter what."

Looking up at the ventilation duct he wished he were a child again, then he could believe there was a God and that he could pray and ask that God for help. But he wasn't a child any longer. Armies on both sides fight and pray, but only the victor's prayers are answered.

A little later Mary came in as she did every morning and sat on the floor beside his bed, her long golden hair hanging loose over her shoulders, outlining her innocent, blank face. She looked at Paul for a moment and then without blinking turned to stare into her private world.

"Good morning, Mary. How are you today, child? Did Marian brush your hair this morning? It looks beautiful."

Those sad, empty eyes looked at him but only for an instant. Leaning over he touched her face, then softly ran his hand lightly over her long silky hair.

"Marian and I think of you all the time. We want you to know we love you. Can you hear me, Mary? Are my words just sounds, or do you hear me and prefer not to speak?"

Nothing stirred in her face. Paul sighed and Agnes entered.

"Hello, lover boy. How's your kidneys this morning? Got to piss? Well, go on, nobody's in there. Oh! Your chain doesn't reach that far, does it?" She laughed. "What's the matter, lover boy, cat got your tongue? Maybe Mary's got something to say."

"Leave her alone!"

"So! You can talk. Afraid I might scare Mary, huh?"

Ever since the attempt on her life Agnes had worn a knife strapped to her side. She now took it out and moved threateningly toward Mary. Paul lunged but fell short as the chain dug into his ankle. Agnes crouched down in front of him, laughing hysterically and smacking his hand with the knife.

"I warned you about that," she said. "I should chastise you but I ain't going to." She stood up. "Nope, I ain't going to punish you. Know why? Because I feel good this morning. And you know why I feel good? Because I found out that one of the girls is pregnant."

He looked up from the floor, startled. She knows about Marian, he thought.

"That's right; you finally did it, lover boy. For awhile I figured you didn't have any lead in that pencil of yours." She looked over at Mary, then laughed and started out of the room.

"Who is it?" he asked.

She turned and smiled at him. "You'll find out soon enough. She won't be coming in to see you any more."

"Who won't?"

Without reply she laughed and left the room.

Slowly he got to his feet. Mary sat staring blankly ahead, her body shaking violently like someone having an epileptic

fit. Lifting her from the floor he sat on the bed, cradling her in his arms like a baby.

"What have we done to you?" he mumbled. "Good Christ, what have we done?"

Next morning was a long time coming. Paul lay watching the flickering candle, the room being tranquil and dim. In a few hours he would kill or be killed. The absolute finality of it, oddly enough, had no effect on him; he enjoyed an inner peace. His life, Agnes', and the others' lives, all seemed insignificant. If the end for any were tragic it was a minute tragedy, like the pricking of a finger. Human lives passed quickly—like a flash, a mirage, the flames of purgatory accepted. The only real tragedy lay in the unending. Strange, not to have thought like this before. He sighed and looked at the doorway. *Perhaps there's another way, perhaps I can reason with her. Perhaps. . . . No, no—one mustn't weaken.* He closed his eyes and saw Agnes in all her ugliness.

I've got to kill her, I've got to. And if there's a God, forgive me for being judge and jury.

When the lights came on he sat up in the bed, his body now trembling for action. *I can't act differently from any other day; surprise is an important element for success. Be calm! No, only act calm.*

He didn't speak to Mary when she came in and sat on the floor by his bed, but silently stroked her hair as he waited. At ten-thirty they came for him.

Stewart unlocked the chain from around the pipe and unwound it from the bed while Jones held the spear to his back. When they came through the doorway Paul saw Agnes sitting on her bed watching him, and he put his head down so as not to show his tension, although he had a strong urge to look toward Marian. Inside him his heart was pounding furiously, all his senses at their peak. This would be it. No turning back now. Then unexpectedly someone took his hand.

"Go back in the room, Mary," he said, trying to conceal

his distress. "I'll be right back." She stood there looking up at him and holding his hand even tighter, as though she sensed what was about to happen. "Go on," he said. "You can't come with me."

From the corner of his eye he saw Agnes rise, just as Mary Spina, sitting at the table, reached over and took young Mary's hand, saying, "It's all right, honey," and pulling the girl to her. "Don't worry, he won't be long."

Paul continued toward the washroom. He could feel the sweat run down his side, the numbing excitement rising in his stomach. Agnes was no more than ten feet away when Marian screamed. He yanked his right leg forward and spun around, the chain dancing by him like a coiling snake. Before Jones could react he had a firm hold on the spear and, bringing his knee up into her groin, jerked the weapon from her hands. Then he turned, slashing blindly, knowing Agnes would be coming at him. The blade missed her by only inches.

"Get him!" she yelled as she backed away. "Kill the son-of-a-bitch."

He saw Stewart and Mrs. Wagner starting toward him with clubs but they froze when he pointed the spear at them. "Stay out of it," he threatened in an icy voice. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Get him," Agnes snarled. "He can't fight all of us."

The two women hesitated for a moment more, then Jones got to her feet and all four began slowly to close in.

"You don't have to listen to her any longer," he said. "We can leave the shelter. It's safe outside. You hear me? It's safe to leave."

"What's wrong with all of you?" Agnes shouted when the others stopped advancing. "Do as I say!"

"He said we could leave the shelter," exclaimed Mrs. Wagner. "He said it's safe."

Agnes seemed puzzled, having obviously not heard anything Paul said. "What? What are you babbling about?"

"He said it's safe to leave here."

"You fools, he's lying to save himself. How could he know it's safe outside?"

"I heard birds through the ventilation duct and if birds can live out there, so could we."

"He's lying, I tell you! He's trying to trick you."

"He's not lying," Marian cried. "I heard it too."

Marian was too close to Agnes who, before he could shout a warning, had grabbed her by the hair and brought the knife to her throat. From its blade-point a thin red line ran down.

"Don't—don't hurt her," Paul begged helplessly. "She's pregnant."

"Pregnant? Then do as I say, or I'll kill her and the bastard inside her."

"Don't, Paul!" Marian shouted. "She'll only kill both of us anyway." But, seeing the look of defeat on his face, she grabbed Agnes' arm and spun around.

Paul leaped across the room, but Agnes had already plunged the knife into Marian's abdomen once and then again, and was pushing it from side to side. Agnes tried to sidestep him but the spear caught her between the breast and shoulder knocking her to the floor. He stood over her, his foot on the hand that still held the knife, her other hand in desperation reaching up for his scrotum. He slammed his foot into her face, then lifted the spear above his head and without hesitation plunged it down with all his strength into her chest. For an instant her hate-filled eyes stared through him, no sign of defeat or fear in them, only rage and hate. Her lips curled into a snarl and with her last breath she cursed him. Then she was dead.

Paul hurriedly stepped over her corpse to kneel beside Marian. "Oh, my God," he gasped, looking down at her. She was bleeding profusely, her intestines spilling like small balloons out of the gaping abdomen. Helplessly he looked up at Mary Spina. She shook her head, brought her hand over her eyes and started to cry. "There must be something

we can do, something," he cried out in a desperate voice.

Marian opened her eyes and groaned, "Paul, Paul—"

"I'm here, Marian."

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with pain. "It hurts, Paul, it hurts terribly. I feel like I'm going to burst."

He took her hand between his own. "I know, dear," he choked.

A terrified look came into her eyes. "Paul, don't let Agnes butcher me. Don't let her. . . ."

"Never, never," he said. "Agnes is dead. She can't hurt anyone anymore."

Marian squinted, fixing her eyes on the ceiling light fixture to stop the spinning of the room. But the light started to fade anyhow, then brighten, then fade again. She glanced at the women staring down at her, their expressions unmistakable. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Oh God, I'm dying," she cried. "I can feel myself. I'm afraid." She gripped Paul's hand. "Don't leave me, Paul . . . please don't leave me."

"I'm right here, Marian."

For a long moment she stared at him before reaching up and touching his face. "Forgive me," she said softly, her voice now composed. "I'm such a coward. You'll be alone now, all alone."

He could no longer hold back the tears.

"Take me outside." Her voice was barely audible.

"It's better if we don't move you, dear."

"Please. I want so desperately to see the outside."

He looked at her for a moment, then sprang to the door. Mrs. Jones tried to block his way.

"You can't open the door. We're not sure it's safe yet."

He threw her aside and turned the wheel.

A damp earthy smell entered as the door swung open. Stepping through the hatchway he stumbled over something. From the light of the shelter he saw the bony remains of bodies heaped in the small alcove. He stepped over them and looked down the long hall at the far end of which sunlight

could be seen slanting in from above. He raced back into the shelter.

"You're going to see the outside, Marian," he said, bending over to pick her up. "We're going . . . out. . . ." The words caught in his throat. "Marian . . . Marian!"

For a moment his mind short-circuited, his thoughts running wildly together, reels of pictures recreating the long months of despair—faster and faster until they clouded his brain and almost exploded in it. Just as he reached the brink of that collapse—the dark world of escape Mary had found—something inside him took hold. He fell back on his heels, his hands tenderly stroking Marian's face.

"After all these months of hell, this is what lay waiting for you," he mumbled. "How pointless, life." He looked up at Mary Spina and said tonelessly, "All she wanted was to see the outside. It wasn't too much to ask, was it?"

In a daze, he carried her into his bed, where he undressed and washed her, and covered her wounds with white tape as if to hide their ugliness. Then he gently brushed her hair and wrapped a white sheet around her, leaving only her face and head exposed. Finally he called Mary Spina and told her to have two blankets sewn into a sack.

He was sitting on the floor beside young Mary when she returned with the sack. She also brought a small military shovel, Paul's trousers and the key to unlock the leg chain. He simply nodded his approval and, sensing his mood, she left the room. Paul removed the chain from his leg but did not remove the jumper Marian had made for him.

At six o'clock he placed her body in its coffin of cloth and, taking her in his arms, left the shelter. The hall had become darker and the light at the far end gray.

"We're going to see the outside, Marian," he said as he made his way down the dim bone-and-debris-choked passageway. Twice he stumbled and fell but rose quickly, determined not to be cheated out of the sight of their sunset. Finally he reached the opening. Dark gray clouds moved slowly across the sky, spitting a mist of rain on his face as

though mocking his helplessness. He cursed as he climbed to the surface with his burden and looked around. Even in his state of mind he was overwhelmed with new shock. For in every direction as far as the eye could see lay complete devastation. There was no trace whatever of anything having once stood on the surface of the now flat, bleak desert. All the scorched earth with its deep scars, nothing more, was without life.

For a moment Paul stood there visualizing himself from outside himself—a man holding a corpse, standing alone in the rain, not knowing where to go upon such desolated ground.

"You've been cheated again, Marian," he sighed as he trudged through the mud.

He didn't know how long he had walked before he realized that every place was the same. Stopping, he dug a shallow grave, and when it was finished he opened the sack and looked at Marian for the last time. Then he buried her in the mud.

When he returned to the shelter the women tried to question him about what it was like out there, but he ignored them. He dragged Agnes' body out into the hall, closed the door, went into the storeroom and rummaged through the boxes until he found the whiskey. He sat on the edge of the bed gulping it down. Halfway through the second bottle he passed out.

The morning air was still and warm when Paul left the shelter. He was no more than a few hundred yards out when he heard the women behind him. He stopped and looked at them, then turned and continued walking. Within a few minutes Mary Spina and young Mary were at his side.

Without looking at them he said, "You shouldn't have come out yet. I can't be sure it's safe."

"They took a vote on it. They were afraid you might find something and not come back."

He shrugged and said no more.

After a short distance the women, having difficulty walking, removed the high-heeled shoes they had not worn for more than a year, but by noon it became hot and they were forced to put them on again. All day they walked, eyes searching in vain for life, any life. So complete was the devastation that they could find no shade anywhere and they had no appetite for the lunch they had brought. The sun beat mercilessly down. Exhausted, staggering, they retraced their steps. Back at the shelter the heaps of bones in the hall were only reminders of what possibly lay ahead. In the shelter doubts turned to anger.

"He tricked us. We're all going to die," one woman shouted.

"We shouldn't have listened to him," cried another. "There's no birds. He lied."

He looked coldly at them, his eyes contemptuous, challenging each of them, as though he welcomed some outlet for his own silent outrage. At that very moment it became clear that he was no longer the civilized man who had led them so casually into the shelter. They had helped destroy that man, make him a stranger, someone to be feared while still cherishing their own pitiful lives. He had no more to lose. And deep down they knew they deserved no compassion or pity, having also robbed him of the capacity for it.

The room became frightfully silent. It was as though their silence made apology, hoping to stay the trigger to his anger. They sighed in relief when he finally turned away and entered the storeroom.

That night as he lay in the dark he wondered what it could have been that he and Marian heard. Perhaps something loose in the ventilation duct? It was too late to worry about it now. Tomorrow he would go west to the Potomac River. If there were any life to be found, the most probable place to find it would be by the river.

At dawn they left the shelter. The morning was cool and

windy, the scorched earth lifted into twirling circles of dust, dancing like a tormentor around them, filling their eyes and lungs. They moved slowly, lost souls, across the barren land. By noon the wind subsided, and then the tormentor became the scorching sun overhead.

"Look! Look! There it is!" someone called.

Paul saw the river. It was so strange and beautiful a sight in its movement and glittering color against the bleak surroundings that for a moment he thought it was a mirage. Like joyful children the women raced forward as though believing the river to be their salvation. As Paul watched them with young Mary beside him, the waves of nausea that had intensified since early morning finally erupted into vomiting. He turned away and it was a full five minutes before he recovered himself. When he looked up Mary Spina was standing there.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He nodded and ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's probably the heat," she said, shielding her eyes as she looked up at the sun. "A few of the women are sick, too."

"I'm afraid it's more than the heat."

Her eyes sought his and he could see she was shocked.

"It's not . . . I mean you can't be sure."

"It's not only the nausea. My gums started bleeding this morning. A sure sign."

"Then—"

"I'm afraid so. To get a reaction this soon means the radiation level must be extremely high."

She sank to a sitting position on the ground. "Then it's too late for all of us."

He shrugged. "I can't be sure."

"But you suspect it."

He nodded.

"What will we do?"

"Die, I imagine," he said indifferently, without the slightest trace of fear in his voice.

"Maybe if we hurried back to the shelter we could . . . ?"

"There's nothing to go back to."

"What of Mary?"

He put an arm around the girl and pressed her head against his chest. "She'll stay with me," he said quietly.

"You have no right to decide for her."

"Then who will decide? I've made up my mind. It's better this way."

Mary Spina stared at him for a moment, then sighed and looked out at the river.

"Come on," he said, helping her to her feet. "I'll tell the others."

When they reached the river bank Jones was handing out sandwiches. Most of the women had taken a dip in the river and stood dripping as they cheerfully chatted and ate.

"Listen to me," Paul said. "There are no birds. As you can see, there's no life out here. The air is still contaminated." Their mouths hung open in disbelief. "I've already got radiation sickness. If you—"

Before he could say anything more, they broke into panic.

"We've got to get back to the shelter," Jones shouted. "It's our only chance." Then she turned to Paul, screaming, "You did this purposely to us. You wanted it like this." Then she threw the bag of sandwiches in his face and started running after the other women.

"Go on," he shouted, watching them frantically race toward the shelter. "Run, run. Run for your lives." He fell to the ground, laughing hysterically. "I hope you all live," he shouted between the sobs of laughter. "You deserve each other."

A shadow over his face blocked out the sun, and looking up he saw Mary Spina holding Mary's hand.

"I didn't mean that for you," he said apologetically.

"I know."

"You better hurry then. There still may be a chance, you know."

"There's nothing there for me, either. I'd like to stay with you and Mary if I may."

He nodded understandingly.

She sighed with relief as if she had half expected him to refuse her. Sitting down beside him she said, "What will we do with Mary? I imagine it must get pretty terrible after awhile."

"We can go for a swim."

"A swim?" Then she followed his eyes out to the river. "Oh," she said. "I understand."

Paul stood up and took Mary by the hand and walked toward the river bank. Mary Spina fell in at his side without a word.

The water was warm and comforting about their ankles as they waded into the river.

Jones and three other women were the first to reach the shelter. They locked the door behind them, then fell exhausted onto their beds. After a few minutes there came a pounding on the door. Jones rose, crossed the room, paused at the door to look at the other women. No one spoke. A minute passed, then another. Slowly Jones walked back to the table and sat down.

"Four of us can last a lot longer," she said.

The women looked at each other for a moment, then settled back in their beds.

For three days and nights the pounding on the door continued. But it did not matter on which side of the door the women were. It was already too late.

XII

Richard Parker was hungry. Everyone in Rimutaka was hungry. But for the last week he had eaten less than the others, having decided a week ago that he would leave the shelter where he had lived for two years. He had given part of his small ration to Lana, the Maori girl who had taken his father's, the Prime Minister's, place. Today he would tell Bill Douglas that he was leaving. He knew he would understand. He had overheard him speaking to Mr. Gardiner about the hopelessness of their situation.

"The radiation level hasn't decreased in the slightest," Mr. Gardiner had said. "But we mustn't give up; there's still the possibility that—"

Richard shook his head as if to shake the thoughts from his mind. At first it had come as a shock, like a door slamming in his face. But now he was tired of thinking about it, tired of waiting. He was glad his father need never know his plan would end like this.

He took his jacket from his foot locker. He hadn't had any reason to wear it in the last two years and when he put it on he was surprised at how small it was. He reached into the locker, took out a small plastic bag containing pieces of bread, looked at it, then returned it and closed the locker. He would need the bread on the long trip back to Wellington.

Lana sat on the bed watching him. "Are you really leaving, Richard? Really?"

He looked at her, slightly annoyed. "I've told you several

times that I'm leaving. I won't answer you again."

"Don't be angry. It's . . . it's just that I don't understand why you can't wait until they tell us it's safe to leave."

"They're never going to tell us that," he said and was immediately sorry.

"Don't say that," she begged. "It's wrong to say that."

She lay across the bed and started to cry. He sat down beside her.

She was tall for her age, five feet four, only half a year younger than he, but already her body was developed, a common occurrence with the Maori people. Her hair was long and deeply black, parted in the middle and tied Indian-style in pony tails on each side. Her skin was dark, but she had hazel, doe-like eyes, probably the result of English blood somewhere along the line.

Only in the last few months had Richard noticed the physical change in her, beginning when they both were lying on his bed studying and he reached over to get a book on the floor. He had frozen as his hand brushed against her firm, pear-shaped breast. She made no effort to move, and for a moment he felt a throbbing pass through both of them, as if her blood were racing inside her soft flesh to meet his. She looked down at him, a mischievous, knowing smile on her face. Then deliberately she pressed the full weight of her body on him. He felt himself go hazy with a strange excitement never experienced before.

That same night he had a thrilling sensation while dreaming of her, and when he awoke he looked down at himself and knew he had reached manhood. Since then he no longer looked on her as sister or friend but as a lovely creature capable of fulfilling his most secret desires; desires that at night when he thought of her sent pleasant pains through his body and a trembling to his legs. Never before in his young life had he known what it was to want someone so badly. He came to notice everything about her: the roundness of her legs, the soft curves of her hips, the way she walked, her hair, smell, the tantalizing smile and laugh, everything. In

his innocence he wondered why and how all sorts of thoughts came to his mind.

She seemed delighted by the effect she had on him. He being the smarter of the two, in the past she had followed him around the shelter, often to his annoyance, like a pet dog. Now he was in her hands, though she worshiped him still. With her first menstruation one of the women had taken her aside and explained everything. After which there was no doubt in her mind that she would one day marry Richard Parker.

Richard touched her soft hair. "Don't cry, Lana," he said tenderly. "I'm sorry for what I said."

"Is it really true?" she sobbed. "Tell me if it's true." He started to get up but she pulled him back. "It *is* true. That's why you're leaving, isn't it?"

He turned away but already his expression had betrayed him.

"I'm coming with you," she said matter-of-factly, her composure returning.

"You can't."

"I'm coming."

"You can't, I tell you. They say once outside one would be terribly sick in only a day or two, and then die."

Her voice softened. "Please, Richard, let me come with you. If you leave me here I'll only die anyway. I wouldn't be afraid if I were with you. Please."

That was true all right, he thought. She would die. Everyone would. It was obvious from the empty expressions on the adults' faces. No longer was the enthusiasm there as in the beginning. They were like fading leaves clinging to a tree in the fall, waiting for winter. She *would* be happier to be with him at the end. He looked up at the clock on the wall. The breakfast bell would ring in ten minutes.

"Eat only half your breakfast," he said, rising. "Save the rest for the trip home."

She smiled affectionately. "Thank you, Richard."

He nodded. "I'll have to tell Bill we want to leave," he

said. "I'll meet you back here after breakfast." He paused. "Are you quite sure? There's no turning back once we leave here, you know."

"I'm perfectly sure."

Bill Douglas was standing in the hall talking with two men when he saw Richard approaching. He excused himself and walked up to the boy. "Good morning, Richard. I 'd say you seem to have grown out of that jacket. Why are you wearing it?"

"I'd like to speak with you in private, if I may."

Douglas looked at his watch. "It'll be breakfast in a few minutes."

"This is important, Bill."

Douglas put his arm around the boy. "Certainly," he said, now concerned. "We'll go into one of the classrooms."

"I want to leave the shelter," Richard said, immediately on entering. "I should like you to arrange it for me, if you will."

Douglas didn't answer. He leaned back in the desk chair. He too had thought of leaving, but there was Richard, also the other three children assigned to his care.

Richard continued. "I overheard you and Mr. Gardiner speaking about the radiation, and I know."

"Then you realize that you would die if you left the shelter."

"But that's just the point. The radiation is still there and we're all going to die anyway. I just don't want to die in here."

Douglas sighed. "We're not sure of that yet. There's still a chance that the radiation will—"

"Oh, it's hopeless, Bill," the boy interrupted. "You know as well as I that it's hopeless. We have little enough to eat and the adults have less." He walked over and placed his hand on Bill Douglas' shoulder. "Please, Bill, arrange it. I know you know I'm right."

Douglas looked at him for a long moment. There was no doubt in his own mind about the radiation. Richard was

young but intelligent, and mature in many ways. Finally, he said, "I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do." He stood up and smiled. "Now take off that silly jacket. We can't possibly leave today."

"You mean you're going with us?"

"With *us*?"

"We can't very well leave Lana behind. She understands everything. We couldn't leave her."

"Lana—I don't know." Then: "All right, but don't say anything to anyone else. And don't get your hopes up." His large hand ruffled Richard's hair the way his father's used to. "You better push off now before you miss breakfast."

Gardiner paced the small room, finally stopping in front of Douglas. "I suppose you understand there will be no chance to survive. Even if you returned after a few hours it would most probably be too late."

"Quite clear, sir."

Gardiner nodded. "Well then, I approve. In fact I was hoping someone would volunteer." He started pacing again. "With luck you should be able to get three or four truckloads of canned and, I trust, still uncontaminated food back here. . . ." He stopped and looked at Douglas.

"Before I become too ill."

"Yes." Gardiner started pacing again. "It's hardly enough food for so many but at this point anything helps. Unfortunately, dear fellow, there's no one to go with you and help."

"Richard Parker and Lana want very much to leave the shelter. I told him I would speak to you about it."

"But they're only children," Gardiner exclaimed.

"Not really. I have enough respect for that boy to believe he knows his own mind. And as for Lana, her whole world centers around Richard. Besides, if another adult came it would mean leaving four children without a guardian. You get rather attached after a few years. I'd say it's better this way, but naturally the decision is up to you, sir."

"I should like to give that some thought," Gardiner replied sadly. "They're only children and yet they're willing to die for a few days outside. In my heart I hardly blame them, things being as they are." He shook his head slowly, like a man on the brink of despair.

"If I thought for one moment there was the slightest chance the bloody radiation would weaken, I'd never consider taking them with me," said Douglas.

Gardiner nodded. "When did you want to leave?"

"Early tomorrow. I'm sure I'll have to do some work on the truck to get it started after two years of disuse." He stood up and walked to the door. "You'll let me know what you decide?"

"Come to my quarters after dinner."

Douglas hesitated. "Tell me, sir, do you really believe there's a chance the radiation will lessen?"

"No. I think the radiation will be here after we're all dead and gone. But we must try, mustn't we?"

Douglas left and Gardiner started his pacing again.

For close to an hour Richard and Lana quietly waited just inside the entrance of the shelter, Mr. Gardiner just behind them. Two men in protective clothing stood by the door ready to reseal it once they left. Outside, just out of view to the left of the shelter, Bill Douglas worked on the truck in the morning light. Richard had slept little during the night and when he awoke he was nervous and trembling, but now the waiting had quieted him. Lana on the other hand was quite calm, satisfied just to be with Richard.

Mr. Gardiner walked up to the plastic wall and looked out in Bill's direction but could not see him. He turned back to Richard, a concerned and helpless expression on his tired face. "Are you absolutely sure you want to leave? You can still change your mind, you know."

Richard looked over at Lana and then at Mr. Gardiner. "Yes, sir, we're sure."

Mr. Gardiner nodded. A few minutes later, when the truck came jerking up to the entrance, he took both Lana and Richard in his arms. "Goodbye, children, good luck," he said in a husky voice, then stepped backward as the door opened and they darted free.

Once outside the shelter Richard threw his head back to look at the sky. Giant clouds moved there in the early light like tumbling white and gray mountains. He turned in every direction, frantically trying to absorb every sight. He faced the wind, eyes closed, and drew deep, wonderful breaths until his chest expanded so much it ached. Little did it matter if the air were contaminated; he was intoxicated with the clear spring smells of the forest and the earth so long denied him and felt an urge to shout out his joy. He would; he would shout. Why not?

Bill Douglas watched as Richard took Lana's hands to dance and swing her about, circling until both were stumbling and laughing. He found himself laughing with them in the end.

"I'd say we have to go now," he finally called. "Come on."

Richard stopped celebrating and looked back at the shelter where the two men were still busy resealing the door. He couldn't clearly make out Mr. Gardiner in the background but he waved, saw the two men wave back, and then both he and Lana ran and climbed into the truck with the excitement of children starting an outing.

A few minutes later the truck was rolling along the highway. The children's cheerfulness was contagious and before long Douglas started singing a Scottish song with such gusto that they covered their ears with their hands. They descended the mountain. The valley was silent, peaceful, windless and still, having an aura of great solitude. They drank in the beautiful green rolling pastures, unchanged except that all animal and bird life had now perished. Douglas stuck his head out the window of the truck and savored the sweet aroma in the air.

"Aye, spring is a beautiful time of year," he said in a booming voice.

"It's a bit strange seeing the pastures without livestock," said Richard. "Don't you think so, Bill?"

Douglas nodded.

No one spoke for a few minutes, then Richard broke the silence. "We shan't have too long, shall we?"

"We'll probably feel quite well for the next forty-eight hours, they tell me," replied Douglas. "I'd say let's forget about the bloody radiation and enjoy ourselves. How's that sound?"

"I'd say you're quite right, old Bill."

Lana added, "Yes, let's make the best of it. Have a good time."

Douglas laughed. "We can't get too carried away. There's a lot of work to do first."

"In Wellington?" Lana asked.

"No, Porirua is closer." He pressed his hand down on the horn. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, for your listening pleasure I shall sing another Scottish song."

Richard moaned, then all three laughed.

The morning became bright, sparkling, as the truck moved slowly through the valley and along the coast highway, sounding with singing and laughter as though those defiantly breaking the silence were without a worry in the world.

Finally they came to the town of Porirua nestled against the sloping green mountains, still and warm in the morning sunlight. Even the boundless sea, deep blue and beautiful in its calm, merged with the shoreline in a motionless effort. Douglas drove slowly through the town. The streets were deserted and silent—not as if there were no living people there but as if they had simply not awakened yet to the new day.

The truck came to a halt in front of a grocery store on the main street, the window grimed with two years' dust and rain. They got out of the truck and entered. It wasn't a very

large store but its shelves were heavily stocked with canned and bottled goods.

"Would you look at all of that beautiful food," Douglas said, walking around and taking a selective mental inventory. "It will take us about four hours to load the truck, but first we're going to have a good meal for ourselves." He looked for the usual door at the far end of the store, and turned to Lana. "Lana, go in back and see if you can find a can opener and some eating utensils."

Richard was behind the counter. "Wow! Look at this," he said, holding up a box of chocolate bars.

Douglas, joining him there, acknowledging to himself the fact that none of them had to consider the possibility of package contamination, bent over and came up with a carton of cigarettes. "American!" he shouted, breaking open the carton. "I've almost forgotten what it is to have a bloody smoke." He hurriedly tapped a cigarette from the pack of Pall Malls, lit it, and inhaled. Slowly he exhaled, letting the smoke drift up over his contented face, looking blissfully at the rest of the pack. Suddenly he burst out laughing, causing a fit of coughing.

"What's wrong?"

Douglas tried to answer Richard but couldn't between the laughing and coughing. He pointed to the writing on the pack of cigarettes: *Caution! Cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health*.

Richard looked at Bill and chuckled, "Rather funny, isn't it?"

Just then Lana screamed. They both ran to the back room and saw her staring through the doorway of another room where, on the bed facing the ceiling, were the remains of a man and woman. They were covered except for their heads and arms, now reduced to fleshless bones, the woman's skull being haloed by her long, black hair.

Douglas motioned to Richard. "Take Lana into the store. I'll be out shortly."

A few minutes later he joined them, shutting the door

behind him. He placed three plates and forks on the countertop. Looking at Lana he said, "I know it's a shock, but you mustn't be frightened, darling. We'll probably see a lot more of this."

In silence they ate some of the carefully chosen canned food, and when they were finished they loaded the truck and drove back to the shelter. Mr. Gardiner and a group of men and women behind the plastic wall smiled sadly at Richard and waved, pity written all over their faces. He was happy when the truck was unloaded and they headed back to Porirua.

In the quiet afternoon sunshine their high spirits returned and they joked and sang, only now with less gusto. It was nearly dark when they returned to the shelter with the second truckload. This time Douglas had placed wooden pallets on the truck with the boxes of food stacked on top and, by tying one end of a rope to a tree, the other to a pallet, with himself in the truck to slowly pull, the pallet with the food slid off to the ground. Some cans were damaged but it saved valuable time and in less than an hour they were unloaded. When the job was finished he walked to the shelter. Mr. Gardiner pressed a card against the transparent wall.

"How are you feeling?" was written on it.

Douglas smiled, then held his arms out and drew a deep breath while looking up at the sky.

Mr. Gardiner presented a second card. "I've informed everyone of what a wonderful thing the three of you are doing for us. It is impossible to express our deep gratitude. I shall not burden you with questions at this time, but I would be grateful if you left a written report on your findings when you return for the last time."

Douglas nodded. Then he refueled the truck, waved, and climbed in behind the wheel.

"Will we go to Wellington now?" asked Richard.

"Aye, that's where we're going," Douglas replied. "You'll be sleeping in your own bed tonight, my boy."

He started the engine and slammed the truck in gear, sorry he had mentioned the bed when we saw a sad worried look cross Richard's face. He knew the boy was thinking about his parents and about the skeletons in the store.

The night turned cool and damp and a gray mist flooded in from the sea as the truck rolled along the coast highway. A few miles on the other side of Porirua they came to a barrier of fallen trees and rock that had been previously set up to stop traffic on the highway. It took close to two hours to clear the road enough for the truck to pass.

Tired and bone-weary they finally sighted Wellington, its white wooden houses clinging to the steep surrounding hillsides like giant faces glaring down at them through the mist. In contrast to Porirua, here there was every possible evidence of destruction and death. Gutted, burned-out buildings, overturned cars, uncountable human skeletons draped in decaying cloth, their skulls cluttering the streets like fields of white mushrooms. Douglas turned from one street to another, trying to avoid the gruesome sight, but all the streets were the same. Everywhere there was the cold feeling of death, as though awakened spirits were present and watching them, resenting their bodies of living flesh. Not one of the three in the truck spoke. Their eyes were locked on the beam of headlights, shuddering as the bones cracked and snapped beneath the wheels. Then Douglas turned into a street more hideous than all the others. Here the bony remains were stacked one on top of another, as if someone had purposely tried to blanket the entire surface of the street with them. The truck plowed through, only to be stopped by a barricade at the far end.

It became too much for Lana and she started to cry. Richard put his arms tightly around her trembling body. Douglas swore as he slammed the truck into reverse and backed down the street, angry with himself for not having avoided the entire waterfront area of the city. He drove back to the main street, turned south for a mile or so, then east,

and by and by their road became clear and the nightmare was behind them.

Richard was still holding Lana when the truck turned into the Prime Minister's driveway. "It's quite all right now, Lana," he said. "We're home now."

Douglas took some lanterns from the truck and the three of them walked together up the pathway to the house. Richard stopped at the doorway and looked around him. The grass was long and had grown over and into the pathway. A sweet scent of flowers hung in the air from his mother's flowerbed, extending across the entire front of the house. Patches of paint had peeled like potato chips from the doorway's wooden overhang and a loose shutter swayed ever so slightly in the almost windless, misty night. To a stranger the house might have seemed gloomy, even eerie, but to Richard its familiarity was wonderfully comforting. He glanced over to the side and remembered that last night, seeing his parents standing there in the rain, and calling to his mother to come in before she caught a chill. He understood so many things now. He was older now, as old as he would ever be.

Douglas lit the lanterns and they entered the hall; then as if reading Richard's mind he said, "Would you rather I look through the house first?"

"No. I'll . . . be all right."

Douglas placed one lantern on a living room table, saying, "It's chilly in here; I'll get a fire going in the fireplace," and motioning Lana to join him. Through the doorway he watched the dim glow of the other lantern moving up the staircase.

"Shouldn't we go with him?" she asked.

"No, I think he would rather be alone for now."

Richard walked slowly as if in a dream, up the staircase and through the hall. He stopped in front of his parents' bedroom, his heart pounding wildly. Then almost reluctantly he entered the room. A minute later he came out, went to his

sister's room, the guest rooms, and finally to his own bedroom. Then he went downstairs into the study and the cellar. When he entered the living room Douglas had the fire going.

"They're not here," Richard said in a puzzled voice. "I can't find them."

"Perhaps it's better this way," Bill Douglas said quietly.

On his way to the kitchen Richard spotted an envelope against a vase on the dining room table, addressed to him in his mother's handwriting. "A letter for me," he mumbled, sitting down to open and read it in the yellow light of the lantern.

My dear, dear Son,

By the time you read this letter you will probably be quite a young man, big and strong like your father. Oh, how I wish I could see you! It wasn't possible for me to say goodbye to you at the shelter but I looked up and I knew you understood how dearly I love you, how dearly we all do. To part from someone you love is wrenching, but I can't begin to tell you how happy it makes us knowing you will survive. You are part of your father and me, so as long as you are alive part of us lives also. I shan't write much more for we have to leave now. Do not look for us. Remember us as we were. Remember that we loved you and that some day we shall all be together again. Now, my darling, I must say goodbye for now. Your father, sister and I love you and hope that you will have a happy and full life in that new world.

Love,
Mother

Richard read the letter over again, and again, tears trickling down his face, then carefully folded and put it in his

pocket. Bill came up behind him and placed his large hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Why don't you go and wash up now?" he said gently. "I'll prepare some hot food for us."

When Richard came back downstairs he was fully composed. He had decided to make the best of these last days, for after all it wouldn't be long before he would be joining his family.

Dinner passed cheerfully, all eating their fill for the first time in months. Richard helped Lana with the dishes and then the three of them sat in the warm glow of the fire and talked. Bill Douglas had found a bottle of scotch for himself and before long his booming voice, comforting and unafraid, filled the room with song and cheer. Outside in the gloomy world of death the night, awakened by their voices, was very special—for outside the shelter theirs was the only human sound in the entire world.

Finally Douglas looked at his watch and pushed up from the chair. "It's ten o'clock," he said with heavy tongue. "I think you'd better turn in now. We have a lot of work to do tomorrow." He walked across the room, staggering slightly, and put on his coat.

"Where are you going?" Lana questioned.

He turned a sad sort of smile on her. "I have to go some place, darling. I shan't be long."

Richard knew he was going to look for his family, and he walked him to the door. "Do drive carefully, Bill," he said in an affectionate, concerned voice.

Douglas ruffled his hair. "Don't worry about me, my boy. There's not much traffic these days."

Richard stood at the door until the truck pulled away. Then he went back to the living room, banked the fire and, carrying two lanterns, he and Lana went upstairs.

"This is my sister's room," he said, standing in the doorway. "You can sleep in here if you like."

"Where's your room?"

She followed him there. On the bureau was a picture of his school soccer team. "You played football," she said.

"Yes." He looked at the picture. "I was only a kid when that was taken." She chuckled and he frowned. "Come on, I'll show you where the bathroom is."

Back in her room she sat on the bed and looked at him; strangely, he thought.

"Well, goodnight, Lana. If you need anything just call."

No sooner had he gotten into bed than he saw her standing in the doorway. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm a bit frightened."

He laughed. "There's nothing to be frightened about, Lana. Would you rather sleep in another room?"

She smiled. "Can I sleep with you?"

He stared at her. "If . . . if you'd like to," he finally stuttered.

She crossed the room and started to take off her dress. Embarrassed, he blew out the flame in the lantern and lay on the very edge of the bed with his back to her. He felt the mattress depress as she climbed in beside him. They were both silent for a few minutes, then she said, "Are you cold, Richard?"

"No, why?"

"You're shivering."

"I'm not cold." He tried to control the trembling in his body.

"Richard."

"Yes."

She moved closer, her satin smooth leg touching his. "I would have liked to have married you if things had turned out differently. I know we're young, but my grandmother was married when she was thirteen." Her voice turned to a whisper. "I would have wanted to marry you, honestly."

He didn't say anything. He wanted to, but the words stuck in his throat.

It was late when Douglas pulled up in the driveway. His

face was grim as he got out of the truck and walked slowly, devoid of energy, up the pathway and into the house. He broke open another bottle of scotch and sat staring into the fireplace, his face still too grim to show the deeper happiness he felt that Richard and Lana had found each other, if only for the little time left them. He gulped down a quarter of the bottle, then lay back on the couch, the sight of the skeletons of his family still fresh in his weary mind. The heat of the whiskey settling in his stomach for a moment seemed to ease the numbness in his body.

"It won't be long now, Elizabeth. Aye, darling, I'll be with you soon."

Early the following morning they were out gathering food, and twice that day returned to the shelter with their truckloads. It was dark when they finished loading the truck for the third time, so Douglas decided to wait until morning to drive to the shelter with the food.

As they were eating the dinner Bill had prepared Richard got up, left the room and returned with a bottle of wine.

"Is that for me?" Douglas took the bottle and examined it.

The boy shrugged. "I thought perhaps we could all have a drink; you know, like a toast."

Douglas laughed. "Why not?" He opened the bottle and poured half a glass for Lana and Richard. "It will make us all feel better."

"I feel perfectly fine," Lana said, looking lovingly at Richard. "Do you suppose the scientists may have been wrong about our getting sick?"

Richard looked at Douglas. "Do you think they may be wrong, Bill?"

Douglas sighed. "I don't know." He drank the glass of wine then refilled his glass and stood up, his face breaking into a smile. "I propose a toast to Tutanekai and Hinemoa. And to you, Richard and Lana—may God bless you."

Lana blushed as she drank the wine.

"Who were Tutanekai and Hinemoa?" asked Richard.

"They were fabled Maori lovers," Lana managed to reply, still blushing.

Richard's face became flushed as he drank the wine. When he looked up Douglas was putting his coat on. He took a bottle of scotch from the liquor cabinet and walked to the door. "It's a lovely night," he said. "I think I'll drive down to the harbor. Don't wait up for me."

Richard and Lana went to the door with him. "You needn't leave, Bill. Not . . . not because of us."

"Oh, it's not that, son. I want to take a good last look at things just in case the bloody scientists are right." He went outside and in the pathway stopped to inhale the cool night air. Overhead the moon was bright, the sky dotted with stars; he stood looking up at them. "Aye, I'm glad I came out of the shelter," he said softly. Then he walked down the pathway and climbed into the truck.

Richard and Lana stood in the doorway until the truck was gone and the dead silence of the night closed in around them.

"Richard, I have the strangest feeling that we're going to be all right. I think the scientists are wrong. I don't know why I feel like that but I do, honestly. Maybe it's because we have each other now and I want so very much to live. You don't think this is the last night, do you, Richard? I mean, I feel so perfectly healthy."

He smiled down into her hazel eyes. "I sort of feel the same way, Lana. But let's not think about it, all right?"

During the night he heard her in the bathroom being sick. He bit down on his lip, hearing her straining cough. With his whole heart he wished also to become sick. By morning his wish was granted.

"Breakfast is ready," shouted Douglas up the stairs.

A few minutes later when they entered the living room, he was kneeling in front of the fireplace frying bacon. "Good morning," he said cheerfully without looking up. "Nothing like a good hearty breakfast to start the day off." He stood

up and turned, holding the sizzling pan. His face went white. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Richard helped Lana to the couch. "She's sick. During the night she got sick."

Douglas put the pan down and poured her some tea. "Try and drink this, darling," he said placing the cup in her hand. He turned to Richard. "How are you feeling?"

"I've got diarrhea; otherwise I feel quite all right." No one spoke during a short helpless silence. Then Richard said, "There's no use in getting all down about it; we all knew it had to happen. The scientists said it would and it did, almost to the hour."

"Yes, that's so," Douglas agreed, sitting down on the couch beside Lana.

"Everyone in the shelter will eventually have to face it," Richard added.

Douglas nodded. "Aye, that's the worst of it, the waiting. Mr. Gardiner said you were children but you're not, not really. Your parents would have been proud of the way you carried on. You both worked hard and never complained." His voice started to crack.

"Will you be going back to the shelter now—I mean to deliver the supplies?" Richard asked.

"I'll stay with you for awhile if you like."

"It's more important that you take the supplies back to the shelter."

"Will you both stay here?"

"No. We'd like to go to Mount Ross if you have time to drive us."

"Aye. Certainly. Is that where you think your family went?"

"I remember going there with my father a few times. I rather think he would go there at the end."

"Can we go soon?" said Lana. "I'm not feeling well at all."

A few minutes later they left, Richard having picked some flowers from his mother's matted garden to give to Lana.

The truck headed east to Mount Ross, stopping twice on the way when Lana got sick. Finally Richard touched Douglas' arm.

"Pull over here," he said.

Douglas stopped on the side of the winding mountain road. "Are you sick?"

"No, but this is far enough. We can walk the rest of the way—it's not far."

Douglas helped Lana out of the truck. Then he took two small tinfoil packages out of his pocket. "I suppose you know what these are," he said, placing them in Richard's hand. "There's two extra pills in case you throw one up. It—it will just be like going to sleep, they tell me."

Richard nodded and placed them in his own pocket.

Douglas went back to the truck and returned with a bottle of soda pop which he handed over with an opener. "You can wash them down with this." Then as if desperate to say something, anything, he added, "I never could take a bloody pill without something to wash it down with."

"We'll be all right, Bill. Don't worry."

Douglas looked solemnly at both of them, hugged them and then without saying another word climbed into the truck. They waved to him and Richard shouted, "Will you sing a Scottish song for us, Bill?"

"You're bloody right I will," he shouted back as he turned the truck and headed down the mountain, huge tears rolling over his broad face and his voice ringing out in the quiet spring morning. The truck disappeared around a curve, then reappeared again, Bill Douglas' mighty voice fading in the distance. And then the truck disappeared for good. He and the mighty sound of him were gone.

For a moment they stood staring after him, then Richard put his arm around Lana and they started up the road. Coming around a bend they both stopped. Fifty yards ahead, parked on the side of the road, was the Bentley. When they came up to it Richard opened the door. The car was empty. He looked around and saw, at a spot overlooking the sea, a

grave of stones with a skeleton in a raincoat draped over it. He left Lana leaning against the Bentley and walked over to the grave to stand looking down at the skeleton, somehow not feeling saddened by the sight—perhaps because he knew he would soon be joining them. He picked up his father's shoe, faded and weatherbeaten and curled in the shape of a horseshoe. He held it for a moment, then gently placed it back on the ground.

"Is it your parents?" asked Lana when he returned.

"Yes. He must have buried my mother and sister," he replied tonelessly. He looked at her. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit unsteady but I'm all right."

"Come on, we'll sit in the sun."

With his arm around her, they walked to within a few feet of the mountain's edge and sat down, leaning back against a large rock and facing the sea. A soft wind was blowing inland. Scattered white clouds drifted lazily over a glittering blue sea.

"Aotearoa," said Lana in a whisper.

"What did you say?"

She smiled at him. "I said Aotearoa. It's the name my people gave to New Zealand when they discovered it. It means long white cloud."

"I like that. It seems more fitting than New Zealand." He leaned back against the rock, the early sun warm on his face. "It's a ruddy shame," he said.

"What is?"

He sat up. "All this beauty to be here and nobody at all to see it. It's such a waste."

She lifted his hand and kissed it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked again.

"I'm all right."

"Do you want to take the pill now?"

"Whenever you like."

"Why don't we just sit here until you feel sick again? Then we'll both take the pill. All right?"

She nodded and kissed his hand again.

"Are you sorry you left the shelter?" he asked.

"No, are you?"

"Oh, no. If I had it to do over again I'd gladly do the same thing." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You've made me happier than I've ever been in my whole life."

"You've made me happy, too. I love you, Richard."

A moment later she crouched over and moaned. Then she sat up and took a deep breath.

He knelt, brushing the hair back off her face. "I think we should take the pill now." He reached into his pocket for the tinfoil package, broke it open and stared down at the two white pills in the palm of his hand. Then, as if it were fragile, he handed one to her. "Are you afraid?" he asked in a soft, infinitely tender voice.

She looked at the pill. "I'm . . . I'm glad you're here with me."

He opened the bottle of soda pop, tossed the pill into his mouth, then took a large swallow from the bottle. "There," he said. "It's over with." He looked at Lana. "And now you." Her hand was trembling. "Don't be afraid. It's like going to sleep," he said, handing her the bottle.

She put the pill in her mouth and washed it down with the soda. They both leaned back against the rock. "How long will it take?" she asked.

"I suppose not long." He took her hand in his. "I wonder what Bill is doing now? Probably still gathering food. I've heard the radiation doesn't affect adults quite so quickly." He closed his eyes, a warmth growing inside him, warmer than the sun on his face. "Aotearoa. Yes, I do like that much better than New Zealand." He paused. "Lana."

"Yes."

"Tell me about the Maori lovers. You know, Tutanekai and—and—"

"And Hinemoa."

"Yes. Tell me about them."

"The legend said that Hinemoa was forbidden by her tribe to see Tutanekai, whom she loved greatly. One night she ran

away from her tribe and swam in the darkness toward the island where Tutanekai lived. The legend said she was kept afloat by gourds and guided to him by the sound of his flute."

In a dreamlike state Richard listened as her voice became soft, so wonderfully soothing that it floated like a feather on the wind. He imagined Lana coming out of the sea, beautiful in her golden nakedness, laughing and calling to him.

I'll always be with you Lana, always. Lana, Lana, Lana.

A warm numbness edged up his body. He was sleepy, so very sleepy. He forced his eyes to open and look at Lana. Hers were closed, her head lying limply on her shoulder, the wind blowing the long midnight-black hair across her face. Some tendrils caught in the crack of her mouth. He wanted to reach up and brush them away but it was now beyond him to move. He called her name in a whisper so silent it never went beyond the inside of his lips. Then he closed his eyes and for only the space of a final instant was he aware of the gold and orange sun rays penetrating his eyelids. Then they flickered. . . .

EPILOGUE

The seasons changed twice and then all life was gone and the world was silent except for the sound of wind and rivers and seas.

But what is time to nature? A thousand years passed. Then a million. The great ice melted and the seas flooded all the lands. The sun grew dark and died out and a new sun was born. A hundred million years passed unchanged. And then from beneath the sea new land arose and grew green as before.

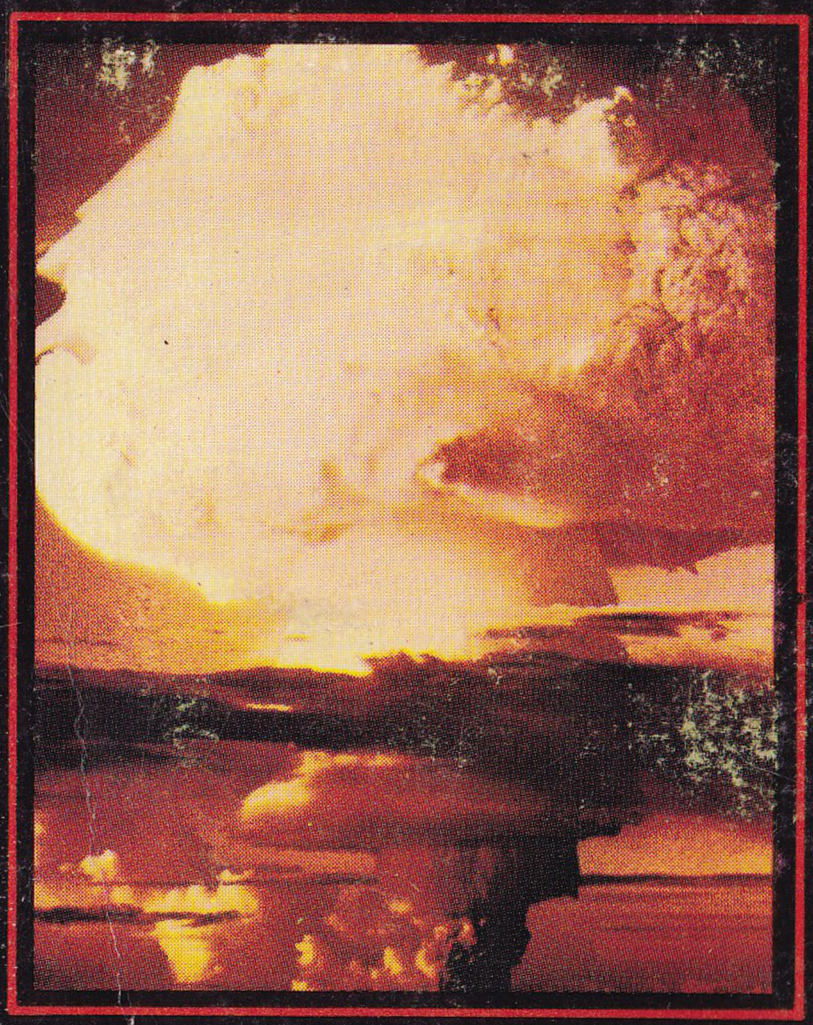
Finally at dawn one day a small, slimy creature wiggled out of the sea and lay quivering on the shore. And from this creature came a sound no louder than a whisper but it thundered and echoed around the world. For it was life.

And it would all begin again.

IT WAS A TIME TO LIVE WHEN THE WORLD WAS DYING!

The day the world had long dreaded finally arrived. No one knew who pressed the first button. It didn't matter . . . with every major city destroyed, the atomic fallout slowly spread over the earth like a black death mask.

In a shelter near Washington, a lone male and a group of women realize that they may have to spend two years together, locked in a steel room, not knowing if they are the last living animals on the earth.

In New Zealand, a frantic lottery is being conducted to determine who is to live, and who is to die. Shelters are being built and stocked with supplies inside deep tunnels in the mountains before the death-laden winds drift their way.

SHELTER is the staggering novel of the breakdown of mankind. The hammer-blow impact will be felt by every thinking human of our time.